



Steeped In Problems

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Category: Romance

Description: What do a sunshine barista and a retired grumpy cop have in common? Even they aren't sure but they're willing to find out...

Kristy Howard left her job at the hospital because she needed a change. Tired of watching people die every day, she wanted an easy, breezy job. That's why becoming a barista at the new coffee shop, the Brave Badge, was perfect. She loves the cozy vibe and friendly customers, but when her ex comes back in to town and brings with him a heap of problems, she realizes that her new boss might be her only way of getting rid of him.

Tanner Blaze never thought he would do anything other than work as a police officer, but when he is injured in a car accident, all that changes. He's discouraged about where his life is going until he hears about Brave Badge Roasting Company and decides to open his own location in Clear Mountain, Colorado. It's far different than working as a beat cop, but he's determined to make it work. He's grateful for Kristy, his loyal barista that seems to be the light in his problem-filled life. So, when she asks him to pretend to be her boyfriend to get rid of her ex, he finds himself agreeing. The only problem with his decision is he quickly figures out he has real feelings for her.

Will Tanner admit his feelings for Kristy? Will Kristy get past Mark's gruff exterior and get him to open his heart? And will Kristy's ex get the hint and leave so they can have a chance at love?

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Chapter One

Kristy Howard's phone buzzed with the world's most annoying chime at 4:55 a.m., and felt it vibrate beside her. She rolled once, twice, slammed the snooze button, and then stared up at the ceiling, feeling the ridiculous mixture of panic and hope that always came with the first day of anything.

"Rise and shine," she ordered out loud as if it might give her the extra push she needed to peel out from under her cocoon of her grandmother's quilt. Her toes stuck out of a rip in her comforter, painted soft pink and slightly chipped. She scrunched them in the cool air and let herself smile just a little. Clear Mountain had a way of making mornings feel like anything was possible.

"Today: my first day at the Brave Badge." It was written on a sticky note beside her phone, in Sharpie, circled three times. The edges had curled overnight. She was going to do great. Probably. Unless she got locked out of the register or spilled scalding coffee on a cop. Or uttered the word "venti" by accident and got excommunicated from Small Town Colorado.

She sat up, her sandy blonde curls instantly defying gravity, and stretched until her spine popped. Out the window, the dawn did its pastel routine over the mountains, blue and purple and gold slicing through the pine trees. She could almost smell snow, except it was April, so maybe just pine cones? Whatever. It was good enough to get moving.

Shower was first on the agenda. She ignored the splattered toothpaste in the sink and the stack of clean towels still sitting in the laundry basket. Kristy had never been the

kind of person who “got ready” in the morning. She always felt like she was scrambling to catch up. But she had a plan today. Shower, yes. Tame the hair if she could get it to cooperate. Eat something with protein. Avoid thinking about the hospital.

Fifteen minutes later, shower, check. Hair—she glared at her reflection. Sandy curls frizzed and exploded in every direction. She had tried nearly every product on the shelf at Hank’s Pharmacy, and still, it was more or less Medusa with highlights. She picked up a bottle of “Curl Definer with Extra Hold,” made a cross over her heart, and sprayed until the mirror was fogged. With strategic bobby pin deployment, it looked passable. Maybe even cute.

Outfit was next. She’d already laid it out: a crisp white button-down (thrifted, ironed the night before), black pants (with only one coffee stain near the hem), and the flat black loafers she’d worn for nursing clinicals. Was it too on-the-nose? Did it scream “former nurse, current overthinking barista”? Kristy had no idea. She put it on anyway, rolled up the sleeves, and tugged the shirttail into a half-tuck.

In the kitchen, she ate a banana and two slices of turkey lunch meat, standing. The apartment was small and smelled of dust with a hint of vanilla from her collection of old books, but the view from the kitchen sink was straight out of a postcard. Beyond the balcony, the mountain rose up, snow still clinging to the northern slope, and a bald eagle circled like it had a purpose. Kristy pretended she did, too.

She went back to her tiny bedroom for her purse and keys, and that’s when she saw them. The scrubs. Hanging in the closet, blue and soft and faded in all the places her body used to ache after a twelve-hour shift. The badge reel was still clipped to the neckline, ID facing out like a dare. She stared at it and felt a pinch of regret and a flood of relief. She hadn’t realized how heavy it all was until she didn’t have to wear it anymore.

“Not today,” she whispered to herself. “Not anymore.” Kristy shut the closet door with a definitive click.

On her way to the car, she passed her neighbor, the retired fireman who was always smoking a pipe before sunrise. He grunted a hello, and she raised her travel mug in solidarity. The parking lot was half-empty. Kristy’s car—a battered Corolla with a bumper sticker that said “Do No Harm”—started on the second try, which felt like an omen. She cranked the heat and let the defroster blast her as she navigated out onto the sleepy main street.

Clear Mountain was barely awake. The local bakery was just turning on the sign. A battered pickup from the Parks Department zipped past, bed loaded with orange cones. The entire town smelled like woodsmoke and distant rain. Kristy rolled the window halfway and took in a lungful of it. She let herself relax a little just as she turned onto Main.

The Brave Badge was the exact refuge she had been looking for when she quit nursing a month ago. It sat at the corner of Main and Timber, looking like it had been carved out of the side of a tree. The roof was steep and shingled, with a wooden sign that hung on heavy chains: BRAVE BADGE, block letters burned into the plank. And underneath, someone had painted a coffee cup with a police badge centered on it.

Kristy parked in the empty lot and just stared at the building. It was so much more than the new coffee shop in town. It was a promise. A second chance. She ran her fingers over the steeringwheel and tried to breathe. Tried to picture what it would feel like to belong here. Tried not to psych herself out before she’d even walked inside for her first day as a barista.

The sky was getting lighter, the gold sharpening at the edges of the clouds. She checked her reflection in the rearview. Not bad. She fluffed her curls, adjusted the

collar of her shirt, and gave herself a thumbs-up.

“You’ve got this,” she encouraged, and this time it didn’t sound like a lie.

Kristy grabbed her bag, locked the car, and crossed the lot. Each step made her more aware of her heartbeat. The front door was painted blue, with a bell that waited above it. She reached for the handle and paused just long enough to feel the cold through the metal and the possibility behind the glass.

This was it. Her new start. Kristy took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and opened the door.

The first thing Kristy noticed when she stepped inside was the smell. Not just coffee—though it was strong and glorious—but cinnamon and warm bread and something else. Leather, maybe. It felt familiar in her lungs, like the hospital’s burned coffee haze minus the underlying terror from knowing that there was another tragedy waiting around every corner. The walls were wood-planked, decorated with framed photos of local search-and-rescue teams, some in uniform, some grinning with arms slung around each other like they’d just survived something monumental. There were corner booths, mismatched armchairs, and a whole section up front for “badge buddies,” the sign read. Every table had a little metal tent sign: Tell us your hero story.

“Ho-lee Moses, I thought you’d never get here,” said a voice, fast and bright as a firework.

Rhonda stood behind the counter, drying a mug with the energy of a game show host. She had flaming red hair—actual red, not out-of-the-box “auburn”—and the kind of smile that took over her whole face. She wore a Brave Badge T-shirt with the sleeves cut off and black leggings and had two pens and a dry-erase marker stuck behind one ear.

“Sorry, I’m—” Kristy looked at the clock. She was fifteen minutes early. “—early?”

“Rhonda,” the woman introduced, sticking out her hand. “Obviously. I’m your fearless leader-slash-beverage sensei. You must be Kristy.” Her handshake was powerful, and her eyes, huge and blue, did not blink.

“That’s me,” Kristy returned and immediately wanted to crawl under the counter.

Rhonda chuckled. “Let me show you your domain. Apron’s in the bin—no, not that bin, the one with the chicken sticker,” she gestured with her hand. “You’re a medium, right?”

“Large, but I pretend it’s a medium. Makes me feel athletic.” Kristy fumbled into the apron, double-knotting it just to keep her hands busy.

“You’ll fit right in.” Rhonda picked up a mug from the nearby rack and spun toward the espresso machine. “You ever work one of these?”

“Does a Keurig count?” Kristy asked.

“Ha! Bless your heart.” Rhonda pointed at the gleaming beast of buttons and dials. “This is Daisy. Treat her nice, and she’ll make you a star—or at least a competent barista. First rule—never call a drink a venti around here. We’re strictly small, medium, and behemoth.”

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“Check.”

“Second rule—if you hear a cop joke, laugh extra loud. Most of the regulars are former or current LEO, so—” Rhonda mimed a cop mustache and did a little goose-step, which Kristy could never in a million years imagine herself doing. “Ready for the baptism of caffeine?”

Kristy’s hands shook, but she nodded. “Hit me.”

The morning training was a blur of tamping, frothing, register buttons, and drink recipes with names like “The Sarge” and “Flaming Hot Detective.” Rhonda kept rattling off instructions, but Kristy found herself keeping up with them. She liked the click and hiss of the steamer, the precise choreography of syrup pumps and milk pours. It was almost like triaging patients, but the worst thing that could happen around the coffee shop was burned coffee.

“Speed round,” Rhonda told her. “I’ll be the cranky regular, and you take my order.”

Kristy straightened. “Good morning, welcome to Brave Badge. How are you doing? Any special plans?”

“That’s great,” Rhonda cheered, beaming. “Except most of the time, they don’t want to chat. So keep it short, keep it moving.”

“Copy that.” Kristy could do efficient. She could do brisk. She’d spent years dodging death-by-small talk at the hospital. “What can I get started for you?” she corrected.

“Better,” Rhonda stated with an approving nod.

The front door opened, and a woman in uniform—dispatcher shirt, name tag read “JENNY”—marched to the counter, phone already pinned to her ear. She held up one finger and mouthed “medium black.”

Kristy moved on autopilot, pouring the coffee and sliding the cup across the counter just as Jenny finished her call. “You’re new,” Jenny stated, eyes sharp but not unkind.

“First day,” Kristy confessed. “I’m Kristy.”

“Jenny,” she returned, grabbing her cup. “This stuff is the only thing keeping half this town alive. You’ll do fine.” She nodded, half-smiled, and was gone before Kristy could say thanks.

Rhonda snorted. “She’s a kitten. Wait till you meet the SWAT team.”

Two hours later, Kristy had met three cops, two firefighters, a Parks Department crew, and the mayor, who ordered a triple-shot espresso and tipped nearly five dollars because he was obviously late for something. Every interaction was a small victory, like a game she could maybe win if she kept breathing and didn’t drop anything.

Then came the real test.

It started with the door jingle—two quick rings, then a crash as the door hit the wall. A woman her own age burst in, juggling a baby on one hip and a toddler dragging a plastic dinosaur by the tail.

“Don’t. Touch. Anything,” the mother hissed at the dinosaur-wielder, then plastered a smile onto her face as she approached the counter. “Large iced vanilla latte, please. With oat milk. And a blueberry muffin, if you have it. And—” she glanced at her

offspring “—two chocolate milks.”

Kristy punched in the order, her smile locked in place. “Coming right up.”

The mother sagged with relief. “You are a literal angel. I swear, if I don’t get caffeine in the next sixty seconds, I’ll end up on the news.”

Kristy laughed, then realized she’d made the drink without a single mistake. She handed it over, then grabbed two mini cups with sippy lids, filled them with chocolate milk, and gave them to the kids with a flourish, finishing the order with the requested blueberry muffin.

“Thank you so much,” the mom told her before moving to the back of the coffee shop.

Kristy watched them settle in, surprised by the zing of satisfaction that came from making one small part of a stranger’s day easier.

“You’re a natural,” Rhonda whispered. “Great job.”

“Thanks.” Kristy was mid-victory dance when the coffee carafe slipped from her grip, sloshing a perfect arc of dark roast across the counter, all over her new apron, and onto the floor.

Rhonda howled. “Initiation! You have to spill coffee on your first shift, or Daisy will haunt you forever.”

Kristy grabbed the towels and wiped it up, heat creeping up her cheeks. “I swear I’m usually more coordinated.”

A man at the far table—in a black T-shirt, sleeves rolled up over arms like steel

beams—looked up from his laptop and locked eyes with her. His expression was pure, undiluted cop: intense, judging, impossible to read.

He didn't look away, even when Kristy tried to outstare him. He just tipped his chin and went back to typing.

“Don't mind him,” Rhonda warned. “That's Blaze. He lives here, basically.”

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“Blaze?” Kristy tried to keep her voice down.

“Tanner Blaze. Long story. Used to be Search and Rescue until his accident. Now owns this place. He’s grumpy but harmless. Mostly.”

Kristy looked again, but the man—Tanner Blaze, apparently—was gone from the table. She wondered how long he’d been there, wondered if he was grading her performance. Wondered if she’d just failed her first pop quiz.

The morning rush ended as quickly as it started. Rhonda was off chatting with a table of retired cops, so Kristy leaned against the counter and took a breath. Her heart was still a little wild, but it felt different than the hospital. Less like drowning, more like—well, like the time she’d run her first 5K and thought she might collapse, but in a good way.

She refilled the creamers, wiped down every surface, and rearranged the napkin holders just to keep her hands moving. Every time the door opened, Kristy’s nerves spiked, but each customer was a little less terrifying than the last.

The clock ticked past noon. Rhonda beckoned her over. “Go take a break. You’ve earned it.”

Kristy did as she was told, slumping into one of the big armchairs by the window. She sipped her staff mug of house blend and watched the cars slide by on Main. Out the side window, she caught a glimpse of Blaze, standing by the side door, arms crossed, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. He looked like a statue, except she could feel his attention zeroed in on her like a heat-seeking missile.

She wondered if he was about to come inside and fire her. She wondered if she even cared. It wasn't like she couldn't find another job to fill her day, but there was something about this place that appealed to her. She wanted to stay even though she didn't quite know why.

The door opened. Kristy braced herself for the inevitable confrontation. Instead, Blaze gave her a half-nod and walked past without a word.

Kristy grinned to herself, a small, private smile. Let him try to scare her. She'd survived the ER at County General. She'd survive her new grumpy boss, too.

With that, she stood up, smoothed her apron, and got back to work.

Not more than ten minutes later, though, her perfect first day was disrupted, so fast that Kristy didn't see it coming. She was slicing a lemon pound cake when an ambulance screamed by on Timber, siren blaring, lights on full strobe. The sound punched through the front windows, through her chest, straight to her spine. For a second, she wasn't in the Brave Badge anymore.

She was back at County General, running the trauma bay at 3:00 a.m. The smell of sweat and alcohol. Hands slick with sanitizer, never truly clean. Monitors beeping in uglisyncopation, and the code blue alarm, always there, always waiting to terrorize her. The worst was not the noise, but the look in everyone's eyes, like maybe this time she wouldn't be fast enough to save their loved ones. Even harder was when she did lose a patient, and their desperate expressions shifted to looks of betrayal.

A tray hit the floor. The clang snapped her out of it, and she noticed for the first time the destroyed plate on the floor.

"Sorry," Kristy blurted, not sure who she was apologizing to. Rhonda, who was halfway through a joke at the other end of the counter, just waved her off.

“You’re not truly broken in till you’ve shattered something around here,” she called over. “All part of the process.”

Kristy knelt, picking up the scattered cake, pieces of porcelain, and metal. Her hands were shaking, and she hated that. She tried to will them steady. “It’s just cake,” she muttered. “No one’s bleeding out. No one’s dying.”

But that was the thing about trauma: it sneaked up, even when she changed everything in her life to erase the memory of it.

She finished cleaning up her mess, washed her hands, and threw herself into the lunch crowd. The noon rush was nothing like the hospital, and yet it was. People lined up three deep, shouting orders, grabbing sandwiches, telling stories. There was chaos, but it was low-stakes chaos. No one would code if she messed up a turkey club. The adrenaline hit was the same, but the outcome was better. At the end of it, everyone just got a cookie, not a devastating update that would change their lives forever in the worst way possible.

Rhonda darted behind her, loading the espresso machine and bantering with a group of EMTs at the counter. “You’re killing it, Kristy. Next week, I’m calling in sick; see how you do.”

“I think by then I could handle it,” Kristy said and meant it. She could feel herself getting faster, more sure. She even managed to upsell a giant cinnamon roll to a pack of high schoolers with zero guilt.

Through it all, she felt Tanner’s presence like an atmospheric pressure change. He didn’t hover, just stood at the end of the bar, arms crossed, eyes doing the Terminator scan. Once, she caught his gaze, and he just raised one eyebrow and looked away. It was like being in a spelling bee with a cop for a judge.

At 2:01, the last of the lunch crowd trickled out. The bell gave a sad little ding, and Kristy realized she was alone for the first time all day.

Rhonda poked her head out from the stockroom. “Break, then close with me?”

“Deal.” Kristy poured herself a glass of water and took it outside, where the world was softer. The sun was high and sharp, but she let it hit her face, let herself melt into the wooden bench out front.

She closed her eyes. Breathed. Counted. One, two, three.

No one was dying. She was safe. She had survived day one.

When she stepped back inside, the shop felt different. Like it belonged to her, just a little. She wiped down the counters, filled the condiment station, and arranged the pastry case for tomorrow’s crowd. Rhonda talked the whole time about her old job as a bartender, about how her dog once ate a whole bag of marshmallows and survived, about the time the mayor got caught TP’ing the police chief’s house in high school before either of them was anyone in town.

Kristy found herself laughing, genuinely laughing, for the first time in months.

They closed up at four after the after-school crowd left. Kristy helped Rhonda flip chairs onto tables, then stood at the door, not wanting to leave. She stared at the wall of hero photos. Some had medals, some had dogs, and all had that same look: I made it.

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She knew she wasn't supposed to take it so seriously, but she did. She had made it, too.

Kristy drove home with the windows down, the mountain air cold but not cruel. At her apartment, she hung her apron over the kitchen chair and made tea just because she could. She watched the sunset from her balcony, and for once, she didn't feel exhausted. She didn't feel haunted. She felt ready.

When she went to bed, she glanced at the closet, half expecting the blue scrubs to stare her down. But all she saw was possibility in the freshly cleaned apron that was next to them, and a note to herself, scrawled on a new sticky: "You belong here."

And she believed it. For the first time in a very long time, Kristy couldn't wait for tomorrow.

Chapter Two

Tanner Blaze pulled his truck into the Brave Badge lot at 4:42 a.m., not a minute late, not a minute early. He killed the ignition, sat back in the cracked leather seat, and listened to the engine tick down in the dark. Even here, with the air sharp and empty, he couldn't shake the sense of someone watching him—old habit from the force, probably, or maybe just the mountain's way of keeping tabs on its own.

He stretched one leg, then the other, and waited for his body to catch up with his brain. The prosthesis didn't hurt today, not exactly. It was more like an ice-cold rod up the left side, locked from calf to knee. His right hip ached, too—never quite healed from the crash, and weather like this made it sing. He gripped the steering wheel and

forced a deep breath. Out. In. Don't whine. Don't stop.

The Brave Badge squatted in its nest of frost and dry pine needles, looking like something a storybook sheriff would run. The wood siding was freshly sanded, but already someone had carved initials in one of the front posts. The blue and gold badge on the sign looked crisp in the security light. He made a mental note to check the bulbs before he left tonight. He made a note about everything these days.

The "Grand Opening" banner—two weeks old—had started to curl at the corners, ink bleeding from the recent rain. It hung limp like it already wanted to be retired. Tanner couldn't blame it. The new paint on the window sills had a smudge near the west side. The security camera had an odd tilt. And there, under the awning, someone had left a streak of muddy boot prints up the ramp, the kind that always got stuck in the grain of the deck boards and never came out.

He closed his eyes for half a second, letting the cold morning dig into his skin. Then he swung his legs out and forced himself upright, boots hitting the asphalt with a solid thump. The world did a slow roll, and he blinked until the edges stopped fuzzing.

Key in hand, he walked to the door, every step measured. He'd never been a "coffee guy" before the accident, but at this hour and at this altitude, he'd learned to fake it. First thing he did every day was unlock the place, power up the register, and try to remember what it felt like to have a real badge on his chest, not just a stenciled one on the sign.

The lock stuck just a little, and he had to jiggle it. Another note to add to the list. Maybe this is what he got for taking an old hardware store and turning it into a coffee shop. Lots of creaks and groans, with a bonus of constant additions to his never-ending fix-it list. He let himself in, disabled the alarm and flipped on the bank of lights behind the counter.

Inside, the Brave Badge felt different. Not home—he doubted it would ever be home—but like a suit he'd be wearing until it fit. The hero wall stretched across the north side, full of photos he and Aiden O'Connell had dug out of old police bulletins and newsletters: men and women with tired eyes and goofy smiles, some with dogs or medals or both. At this hour, the faces glared back at him, flat and disapproving, caught in the shine from the overhead bulbs.

He limped past the tables, set up in perfect rows, and gave the pastry case a quick scan. It was nearly empty, just a few wrapped scones left from the last delivery. That meant Rhonda had followed the new inventory plan—she was good at that, at least. He made his way behind the bar, ducking under the rack of mugs, and started prepping the big espresso machine.

Daisy, they called her. Rhonda had stuck a paper daisy decal on the steam wand on her second day, and now it was Daisy, no exceptions. Tanner never named equipment, not on the force and not in the Army before it, but the staff had been insistent. Daisy, it was.

He filled the hopper, measured out beans, and checked the water line for leaks. The motions were muscle memory now, but the muscles hadn't caught on that this was the new normal. Everything here was clean, precise, and controlled. Nothing like the busted, bloody chaos of a traffic scene or a house call gone sideways.

He ran the grinder, and the noise shot through the quiet like a bone saw. He preferred silence, but the sound reminded him things were working. Tanner reached for the tamper, packed the portafilter with force, and slotted it in. He caught his reflection in the chrome as he wiped down the counter: hair still dark and long on top, sides shaved high and tight, jawline marked with a scar from the crash, mouth set in a line that refused to be anything but stern.

Behind him, the glass wall showed the center of town. Main Street was dead, not a

car in sight. In twenty minutes, the first regulars would roll in, most of them in uniform or retired, all of them hungry for caffeine and conversation. Some would make a show of not recognizing him; others would go out of their way to mention the accident or the medal or the fact that he was “doing so much better now.” He hated those customers most of all.

He ran the machine, pulled two test shots, dumped them, then pulled a third and poured it black into a mug. First taste, always. He sipped, and grimaced. Still too bitter. Daisy needed a cleaning cycle, but he’d have to wait for Rhonda to get in—she was the only one who could wrangle the settings without blowing the pressure valve.

He checked his phone. 5:05. Too early to text Aiden, but he’d probably get an earful about the next SAR training anyway. He scrolled for messages, found none, and set the phone face down.

Inventory next. He went to the back room, pulling up the spreadsheet Rhonda had left on the clipboard. Scones, low. Muffins, gone. Beans, down to the last crate, and that meant calling Joe Griffin’s warehouse again. He hated calling Joe, who was always trying to play the “mentor” card, always making suggestions about management or cost control or “building your team.” Tanner was building his team just fine. It was the rest of his life that needed work.

He was scribbling a note to order more oat milk when the front door opened sharp and twice. He tensed—old reflex. Then he heard Kristy Howard’s voice, bright as a ray of unwanted sunshine blinding him.

“Morning, Blaze. How’s it going?”

Tanner grunted and kept his eyes on the order sheet. “You’re early.”

“Punctual, actually. Rhonda said to try for five-fifteen,” Kristy corrected, breezing

behind the counter in a puff of perfume and static-charged curls. She had a lanyard already looped around her neck, her ID badge swinging like it was the most normal thing in the world.

He tried not to scowl. Tried and failed. “Door’s supposed to stay locked till five-twenty. Security.”

Kristy looked him up and down. “Got it, Sarge. Should I do pushups while I wait?”

He ignored the jab and set the clipboard on the counter. “Need you to prep the cold bar. Pastry case is low. Call the Bountiful Bakery for delivery. You know the routine.”

She did, actually. Even with only a week on the job, Kristy moved like she’d been running breakfast bars her whole life. She hit the fridge, set up the milks and loaded the blender, all in five minutes flat. She was...what was the word? Efficient. Not what he expected when he’d hired her—he’d thought she’d be a know-it-all, or nervous, or that she’d crack under the regulars’ jokes. But she didn’t. She just laughed and rolled with it, and if she ever hated anything, she never showed it.

Tanner retreated to the register, running a diagnostic and checking the cash drawer. All the while, he kept an eye on Kristy, who was humming a tune and restocking straws with the dexterity of someone who’d probably placed countless IVs at her old job.

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She caught him watching and flashed a grin. “You want me to clean the patio this morning? It’s not supposed to snow until Thursday, so people might want to sit outside.”

He blinked. That was...proactive. “Yeah. Good. Check for butts in the flowerpots. Some kids have been using them as ashtrays.”

“Will do.” She grabbed the broom and vanished out the side door.

He exhaled just a little. It was strange, the way she made the place seem less like a failure and more like a possibility. Still, he couldn’t let his guard down. Things could change in a second. People left, or worse, they stuck around, and you got used to them, and then they died. He didn’t want that again.

When the clock hit 5:29, the first regular rolled in: old man, heavy jacket, ballcap with a fraying Vietnam ribbon. Kristy was back inside and started his drink, hands moving with perfect precision.

By 6:10, the line was out the door. Retired cops in denim and fleece, two paramedics still in their jumpsuits, and a trio of high schoolers whose backpacks weighed more than they did. Each one wanted something different—black, cream, almond milk, oat milk, sweetener but never sugar, scone if it was still warm, donut if it wasn’t—and each one wanted it yesterday.

Rhonda showed up late, wearing pajama pants under her apron and a smile that could bounce bullets. “Sorry, Blaze,” she chirped, already elbowing Kristy out of the way at the register. “Car battery’s dead again. That’s what I get for buying a Kia in bear

country.”

Kristy just grinned. “You missed the fun. Blaze here already threatened to frisk two of the regulars for jaywalking.”

Tanner shook his head and pretended not to listen. Truth was, the regulars liked getting a rise out of him. It made them feel like things were normal, like he was still the guy who would show up with a calm voice and a flashlight if you called 9-1-1 at two in the morning. He didn’t hate them for it. But he didn’t love it either.

With Rhonda manning the register, Kristy handled the drinks, darting from espresso pull to blender with speed Tanner couldn’t help but admire. The orders stacked up. By 6:30, the ticket rail looked like a ticker tape parade, and the crowd at the pickup bar was three deep.

Tanner knew he needed a floater, someone to bus tables and help when orders piled up. But the cash flow was already tight, and last week’s numbers were down. He did the math in his head and didn’t like the answer. Hiring someone else would have to wait.

Instead, he moved in to help. He was supposed to be the owner, not a deadweight.

He started with the basics—pour-overs and drip. He could do those with minimal knowledge, almost in his sleep, and sometimes did on the nights when his leg ached too bad for real sleep. But the ticket printer betrayed him and spat out specialty drinks like machine-gun fire, and soon, he was staring down a caramel latte avalanche, a triple-shot oat milk concoction, and something called a ‘Flamin’ Sarge’ that Rhonda had invented just to piss him off.

He tried. He really did. He even managed to get through three orders before it happened.

He was lining up a row of cups, left hand steadying the next, right hand on the steam wand. The milk pitcher slipped on a wet ring and tumbled, splattering foam across his shirt and onto the counter. He grabbed for it, but too late. The pitcher hit the floor and rolled.

“You okay, boss?” Kristy asked, eyes sharp.

“Fine,” he growled, forcing it.

He reached for another pitcher, but the rhythm was broken. The next shot, he tamped too hard. The portafilter jammed in the group head, and when he finally freed it, the gasket spat scalding water straight onto the back of his hand. It stung, sharp and mean.

“Dang it,” he muttered.

A mother with a toddler stared at him over the top of her cup. Her lips pressed together so tight they were nearly blue. The toddler, in Spider-Man pajamas, pointed at Tanner and giggled.

He wiped his hand on a towel, bit down on the pain, and tried to keep up. But the mistakes multiplied. By 7:00, he’d ruined two more drinks and had to remake a bagel sandwich after burning it in the toaster oven.

He glanced at the ticket rail. Still too many. The panic started low, a spark in the gut, but it spread fast.

That was when Kristy stepped in. “Blaze, I’ll handle the hot bar. Could you stock the fridge?” She said it easy, like she was asking for help moving a chair.

He nodded, trying not to look relieved. “Yeah. I’ll check on the next delivery, too.”

He ducked out to the storeroom, passing the cooler where Rhonda and Kristy were moving like twin tornadoes. The noise faded as he slipped into the back, and for a moment, he let himself lean against the wall and close his eyes.

Get it together, Blaze, he admonished himself.

He knew why the nerves were getting to him. It was the same every time the shop got busy. The brain would go into overdrive, looking for threats. The body kept waiting for the next disaster—an accident, a call, a burst of gunfire. Here, the worst that could happen was a burned muffin or a customer who thought oat milk was a right, not a privilege. But still, it felt like he was about to screw up something big. He always did.

The break room was barely the size of a closet, and the “office” was a folding table, a laptop, and a battered file cabinet that still had the name of the previous owner stenciled on the side. He walked past it, ignoring the invoices and the bills piled up next to the computer, and headed for the bathroom.

He locked the door, ran cold water over his hand, and studied his reflection in the chipped mirror.

The scar along his jaw looked meaner in the fluorescent light. The skin on his hand was already red and rising. He flexed his fingers. Still good. Still usable.

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“You’re a cop, not a barista,” he muttered. The mirror didn’t answer, so he tried again. “You were a cop.”

It landed harder that way. Past tense, like that part of his life was over and done with, and he had nothing to say about it.

There was a crash from the front, followed by laughter and the clunk of the mop bucket. Someone had spilled. Again. Kristy’s voice drifted through the thin wall, bright and unbothered.

Tanner splashed his face, dried off, and forced himself back to the present.

He was halfway to the supply room when Rhonda yelled, “Boss? We’re out of oat milk.”

He took a deep breath and straightened his back. “Coming,” he called, and this time, his voice didn’t shake at all.

After the nine o’clock rush, the shop settled into a lull. The regulars swapped war stories at the window table, and even Kristy’s voice dialed down to something less than a five-alarm. Rhonda left to run an errand on her break, and Tanner found himself wandering, hands jammed in his pockets.

The hero wall ran nearly the length of the shop. Photos, mostly in black and white, some in color, all of them in mismatched frames. Some of the faces were gone now; a couple had gone out on calls and never made it back. Most, though, were still around. If you knew where to look, you could spot Aiden O’Connell, the closest thing Clear

Mountain had to a living legend, standing with his arms folded over his SAR jacket, eyes like twin spotlights. Next to him, Zach Turner, opposite in looks and disposition, always the joker, holding the leash of his K9 partner Cooper.

Third row, center, there was a photo of Tanner's old search team. Himself, Aiden, Zach, and a scattering of others. He'd always hated the picture—his left eye half shut, jaw bruised from an ice fall, hair a mess. But every time he tried to take it down, someone (probably Rhonda) put it right back up.

He noticed the frame had tilted off-level. He reached up and straightened it, then brushed his thumb over the glass to flick away a smudge. For a second, his own reflection merged with the faces behind it. He let his hand linger, just for a second.

Most days, he told himself he didn't miss it: the calls, the risk, the endless cold. The truth was, it was the only job where the rules had made sense.

"You look like you're posing for the hero shot," Kristy's voice came from behind, soft but not sneaky.

He pulled his hand back and tried to hide the color in his cheeks. "Just keeping things tidy."

She squinted at the picture. "Is that you in the middle?"

He shrugged. "Used to be."

"Looks like you got in a fight with a mountain lion and lost," she jested with a grin.

"It was an avalanche, actually. Got clipped at the base of Eagle Pass. Bounced off a pine tree, according to the incident report."

She whistled low. “Didn’t know you were that kind of crazy.”

He felt a smile ghost across his lips. “No one ever does until it’s too late.”

Kristy leaned closer to the wall. “Who’s the guy with the mustache? He looks like he could bench-press a truck.”

“Turner,” Tanner told her before he could think better of it. “K9 handler. Nicest guy you’ll ever meet. Unless you mess with his dog. Or his wife.”

Kristy’s gaze flicked to another picture, this one of a medal ceremony and back. “I was always too scared to be in the line of fire. Closest I got was working trauma shifts at County General.”

He risked a glance at her. She seemed genuine, not fishing for sympathy or trying to one-up him. He nodded toward the next photo down the row, showing a group of officers standing on the roof of a burning house, grinning like idiots.

“That was after the Big Thompson flood,” he explained. “We pulled six people off the roof. Four dogs. And a ferret.”

She blinked. “A ferret?”

“People get attached to all sorts of things,” he mumbled with a shrug.

Kristy looked at him then, really looked, and he saw something there that surprised him. Not pity. Not even admiration. Just understanding.

“I get it. It’s hard to let go of something that was such a big part of your life.”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to. She had already moved on, wiping down the

tables and humming something under her breath.

Tanner turned back to the wall, running a knuckle along the edge of the frame one last time. He knew the photos by heart, but he still checked every day, as if the details might change and he would somehow find his way back.

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His phone buzzed. He checked the ID and nearly didn't answer, but habit won. "Blaze here."

The voice on the other end was gravelly, low, and unmistakably East Coast. "You sound like you need a cup of your own medicine, son."

Tanner exhaled. "Joe. Didn't think you called before noon."

"Time zone, buddy. And business waits for no one," said Joe Griffin, owner and founder of Brave Badge Roasting. "How's my favorite cop-turned-caffeine-pusher?"

Tanner cradled the phone between his jaw and shoulder, glancing to make sure Rhonda hadn't wandered back in. "Things are...fine. Busy most mornings. Still working out the kinks."

"That's what I wanted to talk about," Joe's tone shifted. "I got the latest reports. Your numbers aren't where we need them, Blaze. Not even close."

Tanner's jaw tightened. "It's only been two weeks."

"Two and a half," Joe corrected. "You know what they're doing at the Glenwood Springs shop? Double your take with half the square footage. And don't get me started on that new one in Kansas."

Tanner could feel the blood rising in his neck. "I hired good people. We're not wasting product. It's just slow. It's the off-season for tourists—most of our traffic right now is regulars, and they like to linger."

Joe laughed, the sound dry and a little cruel. “Listen: you’ve got two more weeks before I send someone out to ‘evaluate and assist.’ You know what that means.”

“Yeah,” Tanner said, his voice flat. “I know.”

Joe softened, just a touch. “I didn’t bring you into this to set you up to fail. But you gotta treat this like a job, not a retirement hobby. Get the numbers up, or I’ll have to make some calls.”

“I’ll handle it,” Tanner assured him.

There was a pause on the line, the kind that meant Joe was considering a pep talk but couldn’t find the words.

“Good man. Tell Rhonda and the new girl I said hey,” Joe finished and hung up before Tanner could reply.

Tanner stared at the phone for a long minute. The urge to throw it was strong, but he tamped it down. Instead, he closed his fist around the receiver, white-knuckled, and set it gently on the counter.

Across the shop, Kristy was wiping down the condiment bar, still humming.

He walked over to the espresso machine, hands steady but heart going double-time. The world outside was still cold, still sharp, but in here, there was work to be done.

He started grinding beans for the next pot, each movement harder and faster than necessary.

This wasn’t the badge he’d trained for. But it was the one he had left. He’d do whatever was necessary to make it count.

Chapter Three

Kristy had started to count on the mid-morning lull. Every shift, right after the school stampede but before the lunch crowd trampled in, Brave Badge turned into her own personal spa. She'd rest her arms on the bar, breathe in the cinnamon haze, and watch the sunlight fall in shimmery rectangles over the hero wall. Rhonda always used the lull to "take her break," which meant twenty minutes of scrolling Facebook in the stockroom. Kristy didn't mind. She loved the quiet, the routine, the way nothing chaotic could happen when the place was nearly empty.

The only customers were a mother with a baby who mostly napped and a guy in flannel who was either writing a novel or tracking a murder board in his spiral notebook. Kristy wiped down the counter for the third time, refilled the sugar caddy, and tried to ignore the way her mind kept racing to intriguing thoughts about her boss, Blaze.

The door opened, and she looked up out of reflex. The group that walked in next didn't belong to the regular world of lattes and laptop campers. She recognized them instantly, even without the uniforms: Dr. Patel, in a North Face vest and wire-rimmed glasses; Nurse Gomez, high black ponytail, badge stillclipped to her belt; and Mike from the ER tech crew, shoulders hunched as if he was still battling a stubborn blood pressure machine.

For a microsecond, Kristy considered ducking below the pastry case, but she froze, caught somewhere between fight and flight. It was the first time since quitting County General that she'd seen any of them outside the fluorescent hospital haze.

"Oh my God, Kristy?" Nurse Gomez called, already halfway to the register. "Is that you?"

"Hey, yes, hi," Kristy greeted, unable to keep her voice from shooting up an octave.

She willed herself to stay planted, hands gripping the edge of the counter so tight her knuckles went pale. “Wow, you guys are up early for people who don’t have a shift.”

Dr. Patel gave her a slow once-over, his eyes lingering on her Brave Badge apron, then flicking up to her face. “You look...different,” he observed as if someone had swapped her out for a rundown model.

“She looks fantastic,” Nurse Gomez jumped in. “You’re glowing. Barista life must agree with you.”

Mike didn’t say anything. He just stood with his hands in his jacket pockets, studying the floor. Kristy remembered that about him—never the first to talk, but always the first to notice when something was wrong.

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“Are you managing this place now?” Dr. Patel asked, leaning one elbow on the counter. “Or is this just a side gig?”

“Just helping out for a bit,” Kristy lied, bright and easy. “Needed a change of pace. Hospitals are...you know. A lot.”

Nurse Gomez snorted. “A lot is right. We lost three nurses in the last month. One of the new temps they hired passed out during a code. Literal face-plant. You would’ve loved it, Kristy.”

“Is that why you left?” Dr. Patel pressed, brows up. “Staffing’s a mess everywhere, but you were one of the best. Was it the pay? Or the hours?”

Kristy’s foot started tapping under the counter. “It was mostly me,” she told him, hands unclenching, then re-clenching. “Needed to do something different. Something not involving bodily fluids for once.”

That landed a laugh from Nurse Gomez, and even Mike cracked a ghost of a smile. But Dr. Patel just kept looking at her, and Kristy recognized the expression. It was the same one he used on patients who wouldn’t take their meds: concern, but with a side of judgment. It made her glad she didn’t mention that it was all the death that had been the real reason. She couldn’t stomach it anymore.

“Hospital hasn’t been the same without you,” he said, voice low. “You know, if you ever wanted to come back, I could?—”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Kristy cut in a little too fast. “But I kind of like it here. No real

emergencies. Less screaming and crying.”

Mike finally looked up. “Do you miss it?” he questioned. “You know. Work that really counts.”

She wanted to say no, that every day here was like a breath she didn’t have to count. She’d forgotten the sting of sanitizer and the buzz of trauma alarms. But the truth was messier, and Mike would probably see right through the lie.

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “But I can help people here, too. Just in a different way.”

There was a silence. Not awkward, exactly, but heavy. Nurse Gomez glanced at the pastry display, then pointed. “Is that lemon loaf as good as it looks?”

“Best in the county,” Kristy promised, and she meant it.

She poured their drinks—black coffee for Dr. Patel, oat-milk chai for Gomez, and a giant coffee with four sugars and half-and-half for Mike. She sliced two slabs of lemon loaf, plated them, and slid everything across the counter in record time. She made herself smile and ask how the old unit was doing, but the answers were just more stories of chaos and loss. Not enough staff. Not enough time. More kids coming in with frostbite. More overdoses, even in the off-season.

“You made it seem easy,” Nurse Gomez praised, patting Kristy’s hand over the counter. “I don’t think I ever said thanks for all the times you covered for me when I needed to leave early to take care of my kid.”

Kristy blinked. “You don’t have to?—”

“I do,” Gomez insisted, with a finality that made Kristy’s throat go tight.

Dr. Patel nodded but still looked like he was studying a particularly confusing X-ray. “I hope you’re happy here,” he told her, voice warmer now but still tinged with disbelief.

The group took their coffees to a corner table, leaving Kristy to hover by the register, pretending to wipe down a clean countertop. She snuck glances at them every so often, catching them sneaking glances right back.

The next customer was a guy with a Bluetooth headset and zero patience. He snapped his order so fast that she had to ask him to repeat it twice. She smiled through it, but her mind was somewhere else. Every word from her old coworkers replayed on a loop, echoing in the silence after they left.

As soon as they stood and headed for the door, Kristy ducked into the hallway to the break room, pressed her back against the wall, and took a minute to just breathe.

She tried to convince herself she didn’t care what they thought, that it didn’t matter if Dr. Patel saw her as a burnout or a waste. But the feeling sat in her stomach, heavy as a stone, growing colder with every passing second.

A barista’s life was supposed to be simple, she reminded herself. It was supposed to be healing. It wasn’t supposed to bring the ghosts with it.

After a few minutes, she splashed water on her face in the staff bathroom, fluffed her curls, and returned to the counter, smile ready and practiced.

But her foot kept tapping under the bar, and she couldn’t stop thinking about the old life she’d left behind.

Not today, she chastised herself, focus on taking the next order with a smile. But she knew it would always be there, waiting.

By 11:20, the line at Brave Badge had grown teeth. Kristy went into triage mode: two tickets deep, a woman barking for non-dairy caramel, and a guy in cargo shorts requesting “the strongest thing you’ve got.” She cranked out shots, steamed milk, and poured—pour, pour, pour. Daisy hissed and bellowed like an angry cat, which honestly felt appropriate.

Kristy’s head buzzed, but not with caffeine. Every second she wasn’t double-fisting portafilters, her brain spooled back to that stupid hospital run-in. Was she a coward? Had she actually let down the trauma unit? Did they secretly pity her, wearing her ridiculous apron, pretending she was more than a nurse who flamed out?

“Grande, extra-hot, double-vanilla, light whip for Brenda,” she called, slapping the cup onto the pickup bar.

“Make that two,” came a voice from the waiting cluster. The guy ordering wore a Broncos hat and a tourist’s sunburn, but Kristy was too busy trying to remember how to spell “vanilla” to care.

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Daisy let out a high-pitched squeal. Kristy nudged the steam wand off, dumped spent grounds and nearly scalded her wrist in the process. Her hands were jittery. She had to steady them on the edge of the counter before she could even wipe away the spilled foam.

“Rough morning?” Rhonda asked, hovering by the register.

“Just...brain fog,” Kristy excused, voice thin.

Rhonda eyed her for a second, then shrugged and went back to counting bills. “If you drop a tray, yell ‘timber.’ It’s tradition.”

“Copy that,” Kristy told her boss with a fake salute.

A new ticket spit from the printer, and Kristy grumbled under her breath. The order was a monster: two drinks, one a venti latte with three add-ons, the other a “secret menu” monstrosity that was basically dessert in a cup. She knocked out the first, then set to work on the second.

She almost didn’t notice Tanner emerge from the back room. He was carrying a sheaf of invoices, scowling at the numbers like he could burn a hole in them with his eyeballs. Kristy could tell from the lines on his face that the day wasn’t improving for him either.

He didn’t see her at first. She pivoted from Daisy with both finished drinks, one in each hand, and that’s when their trajectories collided.

He stepped left at the exact moment she spun from the bar. The world went slow, like an old movie. The top-heavy venti swung wild. Tanner tried to dodge, but Kristy's wrist gave a nervous twitch, and the entire cup launched forward in an arcing splash of hot foam.

It hit him dead center, square in the chest, painting his dark shirt with a dramatic, frothy bullseye.

"Hey," Tanner's free hand shot up, but too late. The heat seeped in; the shirt stuck to his skin. He let out a hiss, dropped the paperwork on the floor, and tried to peel the cotton away from his chest.

Every customer in the shop looked up. Even Daisy seemed to go quiet for a half-second as if enjoying the chaos.

"Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. I am SO sorry," Kristy sputtered out, grabbing at a stack of napkins. She skidded around the bar, eyes locked on the sopping mess she'd made of his shirt. "Are you burned? Let me...let me get ice or?"

Tanner's face was pure murder for about a second and a half, but then something shifted. Maybe it was the way Kristy hovered, napkins fluttering, or the way her hands wouldn't stop shaking even after the danger had passed.

"It's fine. I've had worse," he grunted, dabbing at the wet patch. "Doesn't even sting."

Kristy tried to mop up the spill, but every napkin she touched turned to pulp. She was so mortified that she didn't even care that her own apron was now spattered in someone else's coffee.

"Seriously, you're bleeding," she blurted, pointing to a faint pink on his forearm.

He looked, then gave a derisive snort. “That’s a scratch. You should see what Daisy did to my knuckle last week.”

Kristy almost laughed, but the shake in her hands wouldn’t stop. “I’m really sorry. I wasn’t watching. I had...a lot on my mind.”

“Things happen. I know that better than anyone.” Tanner looked right at her, and this time, his expression wasn’t angry. Just...concerned, in a way she hadn’t seen before. It caught her off guard, and she wasn’t sure what to make of the softer side he revealed. But as soon as it came, it went, disappearing behind his normal grumpy exterior. He pressed the napkins against his chest, then jerked his chin toward the hallway. “Take five, Howard. I’ll handle the bar.”

She wanted to object. She wanted to say, “I’m fine,” but the words stuck.

Instead, she nodded, stashed her hands in her pockets to hide the tremor, and ducked toward the break room. She felt all eyes on her, even as she escaped down the short hallway. It was the same feeling she’d get leaving the trauma bay after a failed code: hot, hollow, and visible.

She leaned against the wall, letting the cool paint bleed through her shirt. She listened to the distant hiss of Daisy, the thump of the cash drawer, and the muted laughter from Rhonda up front.

Through the window in the door, she watched Tanner still blotting his soaked shirt and surrounding area. He looked more irritated by the mess than the burn.

Kristy wondered if she’d just become the new shop legend. The nurse who couldn’t handle a coffee rush. The ex-healer who broke things instead of fixing them.

She wiped her palms on her pants and tried to pull herself together.

When she finally returned to the floor, the mess was gone. No trace of foam on the bar and no drip on the register. Tanner was back behind the counter, clean shirt, sleeves rolled up.

He looked at her, one eyebrow cocked. “You good?” he asked, voice lower than before.

Kristy nodded, picking up a rag and joining him at the counter, hands finally steady. “I will be.”

There was an art to ignoring someone while sharing a workspace the size of a walk-in closet. Kristy did her best to master it in her new environment. She measured espresso, steamed milk, and even sprinkled cinnamon on the cappuccinos—anything to keep from meeting Tanner’s eyes. The air between them felt charged, static from the earlier accident prickling up the back of her neck.

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By the time Rhonda's "fifteen-minute break" rolled into its final moments, the coffee shop was nearly empty, save for one old man snoring in the corner and a pair of EMTs splitting a scone by the window. Tanner tackled inventory at the back counter, but Kristy could feel him drifting closer, like a thunderhead building behind her.

She was restocking the mini-fridge when he finally broke the silence. "You're still shaken," he stated, not a question.

Kristy closed the fridge. "Only about how much of your shirt I ruined. The rest of my day is a ten out of ten."

He didn't laugh, but she spotted the ghost of a smile. "You're not that clumsy. Something else is up."

She considered brushing it off, making a joke about caffeine overdoses and awkward Mondays. But she was tired, and Tanner wasn't the type to drop a question for the sake of politeness. So she turned and leaned her back against the counter with a sigh. "You ever get the feeling that no matter how far you run from something, it just...follows you?"

He considered this, mouth set in a line. "Yeah. All the time."

Kristy looked at the row of syrups; their cheerful colors lined up like toy soldiers. "I used to be good at my job. Like, really good. But I saw my old ER crew today, and all I could think was that I quit. I left them behind. I keep trying to tell myself I'm happier, but—" She shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice. I'm still helping people, but not in the way I used to."

Tanner set his rag on the counter and leaned in, arms crossed, posture all cop. But his voice was softer than she expected. “After my accident, I thought I was done for. Couldn’t work Search and Rescue. Couldn’t run calls. Every time I looked in the mirror, all I saw was the guy who used to be useful.” He gestured around the shop. “This? It wasn’t Plan A or even B. But it’s something. Feels like a second chance, most days.”

Kristy’s eyes snapped up to his, startled by the honesty. “You really think this place matters? That it counts?”

He nodded. “A lot of guys who come in here have seen things they don’t talk about. Sometimes a cup of coffee and a dry place to sit is what keeps them going.” He paused, searching her face. “You bring something to this place no one else does. I’ve seen it. Customers leave happier than when they came in.”

A flush crept up her cheeks, half embarrassment, half gratitude. “That’s just because you make me clean the pastry case every half hour,” she teased.

He snorted, and for a second, the tension broke. “You can drop a latte on me any time if it means you’ll stop beating yourself up.”

They both reached for the same rag to wipe down the counter, and their hands collided. Not a gentle brush—more like a static shock. For a beat, neither moved. Kristy felt the heat climb from her palm all the way to her scalp.

Tanner didn’t jerk away. He held her gaze, green eyes steady and unblinking. “You’re not alone, Kristy.”

It wasn’t lost on her that it was the first time he used her given name, and that made it even more intimate somehow. She didn’t have an answer, though, not really, so she just smiled, genuine this time, and let her fingers linger a second longer than

necessary.

The front door opened: a new customer. They broke apart, falling back into their roles, but something had shifted. The heaviness from earlier had lightened, replaced with something tentative and bright.

As she took the next order, Kristy felt steadier. The doubts would still be there, humming in the background, but she wasn't drowning in them anymore. If anything, she felt more herself, stripped of the need to pretend.

She glanced at Tanner, who was already in motion—pouring, cleaning, checking the register with his usual intensity. For the first time, she saw past the armor and recognized something familiar in his stubbornness. A refusal to quit. A need to make things right, even if it wasn't the way he'd planned.

When the rush hit again, they worked in sync. Drinks flew, pastries sold out, and laughter bounced off the wood-paneled walls. Rhonda returned and complained that she'd missed all the action, but Kristy just grinned and told her the morning had been “smooth as silk.”

The hero wall caught Kristy's eye in the afternoon sun. She watched the faces glinting in their mismatched frames. Maybe she would never be a legend, or have a medal, or save a life with her bare hands again. But here, in this small patch of light, she belonged.

She looked at Tanner, who caught her glance and raised an eyebrow in challenge. Kristy smiled, foot tapping under the bar, ready for whatever came next.

Chapter Four

Mid-morning at Brave Badge meant the after-school crowd was hours away, and the

regulars had already rotated through their morning refuel. Tanner liked it that way: less chaos, more control. He could hear every hiss and click of the espresso machine, every shuffle of boots on the pine floor. Light poured in through the south-facing windows, sharp and gold, turning the tabletops into something brighter than they'd been in their last lives as someone's barn doors. The place smelled like it always did—roasted coffee, baking scones, and just enough burnt sugar from Rhonda's latest failed experiment to give the air a lived-in, non-corporate flavor.

He was refilling the pastry case, arms deep in cellophane-wrapped lemon loaves when the front door opened. Kristy was at the register, arranging the tip jar to favor anyone short enough to see over the counter. She looked up, eyes already bright.

“Look alive, Blaze,” she called over her shoulder, “VIPs at twelve o’clock.”

Aiden O’Connell walked in like he owned the place. He didn’t, obviously, but command stuck to the man like dog hair on a white T-shirt. His wife Lindsay came in behind, a longscarf bundled up to her chin, sunglasses perched on her head even though the mountain sun was barely in the sky. She smiled the way people do when they enter a building and instantly recognize half the faces inside. It was genuine but also strategic—a cop’s wife through and through.

Tanner’s first instinct was to duck. His second was to brace for impact. Aiden wasn’t in uniform but might as well have been; he made even dad jeans and a pullover look like official gear. The couple paused near the coat rack, and just the sight of them put the entire shop on high alert. Table conversations dropped a decibel. An elderly man in the window seat straightened his posture, clearly hoping for a nod from the great Captain O’Connell.

Kristy had no such filter. She was waving like she’d spotted a long-lost sibling on a reality show. “Aiden, Lindsay, come in, come in. Table by the window just opened up.”

Aiden shot Tanner a quick two-finger salute, which Tanner answered with a grunt and a nod. Then he turned to Lindsay, ushering her forward as if she were about to accept an award. Kristy started prepping two cups before they'd even made it to the counter, fingers flying over the espresso setup, smile on full blast.

Tanner went back to his pastries. He'd restocked the scones twice, but people kept buying them, so he lined up another row, making sure the blueberry ones faced out. He kept his eyes on the tray, but ninety percent of his focus was on the conversation happening eight feet away.

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“How are the kids?” Kristy asked as she loaded the grinder. “Still playing hockey, or did they finally get into something with less dental risk?”

Aiden grinned. “Hockey’s in our blood, Kristy. Besides, the dental plan is better than the one you had at County General.”

Lindsay took off her scarf and shook out her blonde hair. “He’s lying. Our oldest quit after last season and took up guitar. You should see Aiden’s face at recitals. Pure agony.”

“I can imagine,” Kristy said, and the two women shared a laugh.

Rhonda poked her head out from the kitchen, eyes going wide at the sight of Aiden. “Didn’t know royalty was here,” she hollered, then disappeared with a tray of cinnamon rolls.

Tanner edged out from behind the pastry case, keeping his movements smooth and steady. He felt every nerve in his body switch from maintenance mode to high alert. He’d dodged bullets with less adrenaline than this, but he wasn’t about to show it. He made a show of checking the register, then sidled up next to Kristy at the bar.

“Cap,” he said, nodding at Aiden.

Aiden nodded back. “Blaze. Place looks great.”

Tanner shrugged. “All Rhonda and Kristy. I just fix what breaks.”

“That’s gotta be a full-time job with Rhonda around,” Aiden said, causing Tanner to let out a small chuckle, and for a split second, the old camaraderie flickered between them.

“I heard that,” Rhonda called out from the back. “And I resemble it.”

Kristy poured steamed milk into two cups without measuring the amount. “Americano for the Cap, vanilla oat for Lindsay, right?”

“You’ve got a memory like a steel trap,” Lindsay said, accepting the mug with both hands. “Thank you, Kristy. And I mean it, your sunny disposition was just what this place needed.”

“Is that you, Blaze?” Lindsay asked, pointing to a photo on the hero wall near the top—Tanner, in full SAR gear, snow up to his knees, hauling some frostbitten idiot out of a crevasse.

Tanner rolled his eyes. “Aiden’s idea. Can’t take it down, or Rhonda threatens to quit.”

“People like to see the legends,” Aiden said, and Kristy barked a little laugh.

“I thought you hated being called that,” she said.

“Only when Aiden says it,” Tanner shot back. Then, softer, “Besides, there’s better stories up there than mine.”

Lindsay let her gaze linger on the photos. “You know, I see a lot of those faces that don’t make the paper. The ones who deserve recognition for their sacrifice. It’s nice what you’re doing here.”

Kristy put two scones on a plate and pushed them forward. “On the house, for the town’s first family,” she said, and Tanner fought not to wince at the blatant generosity. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

The O’Connells took their seat by the window. Aiden set his mug down with military precision, then glanced back at the counter as if making sure Tanner was still watching.

Kristy leaned in, voice low. “He’s been in a mood since Tuesday. Something about the new chief, or maybe it’s just the weather.”

“Probably both,” Tanner said. “And he never liked being off shift.”

Kristy nodded, then busied herself with wiping the already-clean espresso bar.

The shop hummed along, but the center of gravity had shifted. Tanner could feel it in the way the regulars kept sneaking glances at Aiden, and the way Kristy moved a little quicker, like she was working at the hospital again.

Tanner looked at the hero wall, at the old photo of himself, jaw bruised, hair wild, but eyes locked and alive. He wondered if anyone saw that guy when they looked at him now.

Across the shop, Aiden was already mid-conversation with Lindsay, hands moving as he told a story. It was probably about a rescue, or a time he’d single-handedly saved a kid from a flood, or the day they’d all nearly frozen to death on a training exercise gone wrong.

Tanner looked away, but not before he caught Kristy’s reflection in the window. She was watching Aiden, but also watching him, trying to gauge his reaction, like she was still a nurse and he was her toughest patient.

He went back to the pastry case, lined up the muffins so they all faced forward, and took a long, slow breath. At least here, he could put things in order.

Tanner waited a full five minutes before making his move. He could have stayed behind the bar and pretended to be busy with bean inventory or the minor leak under Daisy's drip tray, but that would have been weak, and Tanner Blaze didn't do weak. He wiped his hands on a towel, smoothed the front of his Brave Badge polo, and crossed the room with the gait of someone who'd been stitched back together and didn't want to test the seams.

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Aiden spotted him coming and stood, which was either a cop thing or an old friend thing, maybe both. Their handshake had always been the same—two hard pumps, a shoulder clap, and a half hug that said more than words ever could. Tanner felt the heat of Aiden’s grip, the silent message: You’re not alone, even if you act like it.

“Blaze,” Aiden greeted. “Glad you decided to come over and join us.”

Tanner shrugged. “It seemed like you have something to say, Cap.”

“Sit, sit,” Lindsay insisted, gesturing to the bench across from her. Kristy was already there, perched on the edge of her seat, curls fizzing out in the static-charged sunlight.

The four of them filled the little table in a way that felt almost ceremonial. Tanner didn’t love being the center of attention, but with the O’Connells, it was like being in a huddle—safe, for the moment.

“So, how did you two meet?” Kirsty asked, nodding at Aiden and Tanner. “I mean, before the whole Search and Rescue legend thing.”

Aiden barked a laugh. “The legend thing started before we ever set foot on a mountain. Blaze here was the new recruit at Clear Mountain PD. First call together was a drunk-and-disorderly at the bowling alley.”

Tanner shook his head. “That guy could bowl. Never seen anyone land a 7-10 split while handcuffed.”

“Because you helped him,” Aiden said, wagging a finger. “Dragged him up there and

lined up his shot. He got a standing ovation. And then passed out on the lane.”

Even Lindsay laughed at that. Kristy’s eyes crinkled at the corners, genuine.

“Sounds like you were the fun one,” she said to Tanner.

He fought a smile. “That was the old me. Now I just obsess about Daisy.” Then, realizing how that sounded, he quickly added, “It’s the nickname Rhonda gave the espresso machine.”

“That makes way more sense. I’ve been trying to fix you up on a date for years now. I couldn’t imagine you finding one on your own,” Lindsay said with a roll of her eyes.

Aiden turned to Kristy, voice dropping into storyteller mode. “You should see the stuff I found up in the attic—the Miller’s Gorge incident. Blaze was a rookie, and the rest of us figured he’d tap out after the first rappel, but a thunderstorm rolled in, and some college kid got stuck halfway down. Rocks were coming loose everywhere. I was ready to call it, but Blaze—” Aiden gestured across the table, “—he ties off, swings under the lip, and gets this kid on his back. Climbs out with a busted hand and made the front page.”

“He got a medal for it, too,” Lindsay added.

Kristy’s mouth made a perfect O. “You never told me that,” she said, almost accusing.

Tanner shrugged. “Aiden always exaggerates. It was three meters, tops, and the hand was just sprained.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “He’s always downplaying. You could put him in a burning building, and he’d swear it was just a little warm in there.”

Lindsay sipped her coffee, watching the banter with fondness. “Do you miss it?” she asked, soft but direct.

Tanner picked at a paper napkin, rolling it between his fingers. He didn’t have to think about it. “Every day,” he said. “But this—” He glanced around the shop, the chatter, the smell of bread and caffeine, “—isn’t the worst gig in the world.”

Kristy chimed in, voice warm. “It’s not. And you keep the espresso machine running like it’s on the final lap at Indy.”

Aiden nodded, suddenly serious. “You’re still making a difference, Blaze. People need a place to land after the hard calls. You’re giving them that.”

The words sat heavy for a moment. Tanner let them settle, felt the comfort and discomfort both, the old mix of pride and guilt. It was easier to talk about rescues than what came after.

Lindsay pivoted. “What about you, Kristy? Aiden said you’re a nurse?”

“Was,” Kristy said, half-shrugging. “County General, mostly trauma. But after a while, I realized I couldn’t fix the world. So now I fix coffee. Or try to.”

Lindsay’s eyes lit up. “I pop in there often for my job as a social worker. I bet they miss you. They had a temp last week who couldn’t even figure out how to take the blood pressure of one of my kids. You’d have run circles around her.”

Kristy laughed, all teeth and honesty. “Some days I miss it. Others, I like that the only thing I have to clean up is spilled milk.”

The table relaxed, the mood lighter. Stories traded back and forth, not all of them heroic. Aiden told one about accidentally deploying an airbag in a sheriff’s cruiser;

Lindsay countered with a tale about saving one of her foster kids from a school bully by making them have a dance-off. Kristy topped it all with a story about an ER patient who'd walked in with a live parrot in his jacket. Even Tanner had to admit, it was the best story at the table.

He watched Kristy as she talked—how her face animated with every word, how she pulled in Lindsay and made her laugh with half a sentence. Tanner was good with people, in a limited way. Kristy had a gift for making strangers into allies. He liked that about her, even if he'd never admit it to anyone.

Rhonda checked in once, asked if they needed anything, then disappeared with a wink at Kristy.

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Aiden glanced at his phone and then holstered it. “We should head out soon. Kids will be waiting.”

Lindsay looked at Kristy. “Before we go—what made you leave the hospital? If you don’t mind.”

Kristy paused, then finally replied, “I didn’t want to watch people die anymore. Not when I could help them live, even if it’s just with a muffin and a smile.” She shrugged, but Tanner could tell it cost her something to say it.

Lindsay squeezed her hand across the table. “Well, you’re helping more than you know. Sometimes, you just need a safe place to recoup.”

Aiden stood, chair scraping. “True that. Thanks for the coffee, Blaze.”

Tanner stood, too, and this time, the stiffness was gone. “Anytime, Cap.”

“Excuse me, I need to handle something before we go.” Lindsay stepped away from the table to make a call, cradling her phone and pacing near the front window. Kristy drifted back to the bar to help Rhonda with a sudden burst of customers, her laughter echoing even over the clatter of Daisy’s steamer.

“She’s good for this place,” Aiden said after a beat, eyes on the hero wall.

“Kristy?” Tanner asked as he joined him.

Aiden nodded. “You could do worse than having her on your six.”

Tanner grunted. “She’s got her own baggage.”

“Don’t we all,” Aiden shot back, “but she doesn’t let it slow her down. Not for a second. That’s rare, Blaze.”

There was a quiet. Tanner felt the old urge to defend himself, to explain how he was doing fine on his own, how the shop was running just as planned, but the words caught somewhere between his chest and his throat.

Aiden leaned in, voice lower. “You know, I wasn’t sold on this whole operation when you first pitched it. I figured it was a distraction, a way to keep your hands busy. But you’ve built something. You got people relying on you again. That means something.”

Tanner squeezed his hands into fists at his side. “Still not sure what, sometimes.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Aiden said, his voice suddenly all steel. “What matters is that you’re still in the fight. You didn’t just roll over. Most guys, they’d have punched out after what you went through.”

Tanner met his gaze. “You ever wish you had?”

Aiden thought about it, then shook his head. “Not my choice. God decided to keep me on the force. He has a different plan for you. You just need to trust him.”

He knew his friend was right, but Tanner had always struggled with his faith. He wished it came as easy for him as it did for Aiden.

They both watched as Kristy danced between customers, hands moving fast, face alive. She handled a family of four like it was nothing, even entertained the kids with a joke about Daisy being haunted by the ghost of a caffeine-addicted mouse.

“She’s a good one,” Aiden said gesturing with his head toward Kristy. “You should consider if she could be more than just a barista to you.”

Before Tanner could respond, Lindsay reappeared, looking relieved. “All set. The girls are terrorizing their Aunt Erica so we can head to the grocery store instead of home.”

Aiden helped his wife with her scarf, then turned to Tanner. “You coming to the next SAR dinner?”

Tanner shrugged. “If you need a chaperone.”

“We always do,” Aiden jested with a smirk.

“And bring Kristy,” Lindsay insisted. “She’d be the life of the party.”

“I’ll consider it,” he told them, though he doubted he would ever muster the courage to ask her whether he wanted to or not.

Tanner and Aiden traded another handshake, longer this time, and Lindsay pulled Tanner in for a hug that nearly knocked the air out of him. “You take care of yourself,” she said, voice muffled in his shoulder.

“Trying,” he answered, and he meant it.

The O’Connells left in a gust of cold air and sunlight. Tanner watched them cross the street and disappear into the park, then turned his attention back to the shop. Kristy was behind the bar, sleeves pushed up, stacking cups and wiping down counters with manic efficiency. Rhonda was telling a story to a pair of retired firefighters, gesturing wildly with tongs.

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For a moment, Tanner just stood there, letting the noise and light settle around him. He wondered what the old him would say if he could see the life he'd built now. He wondered if it was enough to simply hold things together.

He caught Kristy's eye just for a second. She flashed a wide smile, then went back to wrangling a new order. It was easy, when he was around her, to forget what hurt. To just be.

He went behind the counter, picked up a rag, and started in on the coffee stains, wiping them into neat, invisible lines. The shop was full of people, but he felt—maybe for the first time—like he belonged.

Tomorrow, there'd be new stories. New faces. New messes to clean up. But for now, the Brave Badge was his, and Kristy was here, and that was enough.

Chapter Five

Kristy was solo on the espresso station, Daisy purring along, Tanner at the register with his usual "I'm not listening to your jokes" face. She popped the portafilter with a satisfying click and knocked the puck into the trash. Then she got to lining up the morning pastries in the display case: four lemon loaves in the front, blueberry scones behind, two gluten-frees in the back like they might infect the others. It was oddly soothing, and she let herself get lost in the repetition, humming along to whatever 80s pop station Rhonda left on.

The door opened, and Kristy straightened, ready to meet the next customer with her best "I totally slept more than four hours" smile.

That's when she saw him. Mark. Black hair, brown eyes, skin already tan from his obsessive morning runs. He stood just inside the doorway, looking around like he owned the place or was about to audit it. He hadn't changed. Still wore that tech-bro pullover that screamed, "I'm too good for business casual." Still had the posture of someone who spent his days telling other people how they were wrong.

Kristy's breath got snagged somewhere in her lungs. The smile she'd been saving turned brittle. She almost hoped he wouldn't see her, but that was like hoping Daisy wouldn't need descaling every week.

Mark made eye contact, then started across the room with a slow, practiced confidence. He ignored the occupied tables, the regulars in the corner who waved, and even the family with a pair of toddlers who immediately began wailing for muffins. Kristy's hands, so steady two seconds ago, started trembling as she tried to load the portafilter. The grounds went everywhere.

She wiped her palms on her apron and tried to remember how to stand. Tanner, still at the register, didn't miss a beat. His eyes flicked to Kristy, then to Mark, then back to Kristy. She could almost see his jaw tightening, but he didn't say anything. Not yet.

"Kristy," Mark greeted. Not a question. Not a surprise. Just her name, like a password. He let it hang for a second, then added, "Didn't expect to find you here."

She forced her face into neutral. "Hi, Mark."

He leaned an elbow on the counter, casual but somehow predatory. "You know, I thought I'd check out the new coffee shop everyone's raving about. Didn't realize you'd traded scrubs for an apron."

His voice was the same, too—just loud enough to carry, just sharp enough that the word "apron" sliced a little deeper than it should have.

Kristy felt herself flush, and not from the steam wand. She picked up a clean cup and nearly dropped it. She tried to will her hands steady, but they had other plans. The cup clattered against the drip tray, and a couple of the regulars looked up.

“Can I get you something?” she asked, keeping her tone businesslike.

“Americano,” he said. “Black. Just like always.”

She turned her back to him as quickly as possible, jammed the portafilter into place, and hit the button with unnecessary force. The machine vibrated. Kristy stared straight ahead, waiting for the coffee to brew, wishing she could be anywhere else than where she was at the moment.

Mark didn’t seem to notice her unease. “So, how’s the new gig? You enjoying the slower pace, or do you miss the ‘meaning’ in your work?”

Kristy bit her lip— hard. “I like it here,” she said, pouring the shot into a to-go cup. “People are nicer.”

He laughed, low and fake. “Sure. If you say so.”

The cup slipped a little in her hand as she placed it on the counter, but she caught it before it could spill. “Four eighty,” she said, avoiding eye contact.

Mark tapped his phone against the card reader, and the tip prompt popped up. He ignored it, of course, and gave her a smirk that made it clear he’d noticed the omission.

“Keep the change,” he said, even though there wasn’t any.

She didn’t respond. She just stared at the cup, willing him to take it and leave.

But he didn't. He just stood there, still smiling that Mark-smile, eyes flicking up and down the front of her apron like he was looking for a flaw.

Tanner watched the whole exchange from a few feet away, his arms crossed, expression unreadable but not exactly friendly. The tension in the room ramped up by degrees. Even the toddlers stopped screaming, sensing the shift in the air.

Mark finally took his Americano, but not before leaning in just a little too close. "Let me know if you ever want to talk," he said, voice low now. "I can help you figure things out. Like I used to."

Kristy's hands curled into fists, hidden under the bar.

“Have a nice day,” she managed.

Mark gave a little nod and drifted to a table in the far corner, where he opened his laptop and began typing immediately like he had a report due on her performance.

Tanner waited until Mark was out of earshot, then slid over to her side of the bar, close but not too close.

“You okay?” he asked, voice pitched low.

She nodded, “I’m fine,” but it was a lie, and she knew he could see it.

He let it go, for now, but she caught the look in his eyes—full cop mode, analyzing, cataloging, ready to step in if things got worse.

Kristy took a deep breath, smoothed her apron, and got back to work. But the sunshine in her day was gone, replaced by the heavy clouds she thought she’d left firmly in her past.

Mark didn’t stay at his table. That would have been too easy. Instead, he got up after a few minutes—just long enough to make a show of reviewing emails—and sauntered back toward the counter with the deliberate nonchalance of a man who needed everyone to notice how little he cared.

Kristy was busy with a regular, pouring a cortado and chatting about the city council’s latest attempt to ban drive-throughs. She tried to focus, but Mark’s shadow was already stretching across her workspace.

“So, Kris,” Mark started, voice a shade louder than necessary. “Is this a permanent thing, or are you just playing coffee shop worker until you go back to your real job as a nurse?”

The regulars glanced up, startled, but Kristy just pasted on her customer-service smile. “Can I help you with something, Mark?”

He leaned over the counter, forearms splayed, crowding the display case and Kristy along with it. “Just making conversation. When I found out you weren’t at your old job, I figured maybe the hospital cut staff, but...well, it turns out you quit.”

She swallowed, not liking how her throat clenched. “I needed a change. It’s been good for me.”

Mark smirked, and for a second, she remembered every stupid fight they’d had, how he could turn even an apology into a contest. “If you say so. Personally, I always pictured you running a trauma ward by now. Guess you don’t always meet expectations, huh?”

A flash of anger spiked through her, but she refused to let it show. “Can I get you a pastry or something?”

He didn’t answer. Just let his gaze drift up and down the menu, making a performance of it. “You know what, I’ll try something new. I hear the lemon loaf is great here.”

“Coming right up,” she said, voice tight.

Mark clapped his hands together like he’d just closed a big deal. “That’s what I like to hear.” He didn’t leave, though. He just stood there, watching her with his beady eyes, picking at every movement with a running commentary.

“You want to make sure to give me a big piece. Don’t be stingy,” he ordered. “And I want it on a plate, not one of those paper sacks.”

She tried to ignore him, but her hands betrayed her—a tremor she couldn’t control, causing a slight slip that sent the lemon loaf slicing unevenly. "Of course," Kristy managed, voice clipped.

As she worked to arrange the disproportionately cut piece on a ceramic plate, it tumbled back onto the countertop.

“Careful,” Mark said, his voice laced with faux concern. “Wouldn’t want to waste good food.”

Kristy gritted her teeth, picked up the lemon loaf again, more carefully this time, and placed it on a plate. She slid it across the counter toward him. "Here you go," she forced out through a clenched jaw.

Mark took the plate, still smirking. "Thanks, Kris. You always were good at following instructions."

Her cheeks burned at the comment, a mixture of embarrassment and rising anger heating her face.

“But you missed some crumbs on the counter. Here, let me show you.” Mark reached toward her, and she jerked back out of reflex.

That’s when Tanner stepped up beside her. “You need anything else, or are you about done here?” Tanner asked, deadpan.

Mark sized him up, then gave a fake smile. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with. I know Kris from way back—she’s good, but sometimes her head gets ahead of

her hands.”

Tanner didn’t even blink. “She’s the best we’ve got. And we like our customers to keep their hands on their own side of the counter.”

Mark looked around as if hoping for backup, but the regulars were now openly watching, and even the toddlers’ mom was eavesdropping from the muffin zone.

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“Sorry,” Mark said, “didn’t mean to get in the way.” He edged back a step, but not enough to let Kristy breathe easy.

Tanner just stared, flat and unblinking, until Mark gave a little laugh and shook his head. “Didn’t realize you had a bodyguard,” he said to Kristy, this time under his breath.

“Just good management,” Tanner replied, voice cool. He took the baked good and placed it in a to-go sleeve. “Here you go. One lemon loaf to go. On the house.”

Mark took it, but not before giving Tanner a once-over. “You know, I always heard ex-cops had trouble adapting to normal life.”

Tanner’s jaw flexed, but he didn’t give Mark the satisfaction of a comeback.

A cold silence hung in the air for a second. Kristy felt her face burn as she watched Mark walk away. She wanted to crawl under Daisy and disappear.

"He always like that?" Tanner asked under his breath, nodding subtly toward where Mark exited the coffee shop.

Kristy sighed, a little puff of defeat escaping her lips. "Worse, usually," she admitted, keeping her voice low. "He has a way of making you feel small."

Tanner's jaw clenched at that, his protective instincts visibly surfacing. "You don't have to talk to him if you don't want to. If he comes back, I can handle him."

She gave him a grateful look. "Thanks, Tanner." Her voice was sincere, warm with appreciation that went beyond his offer of help. It was clear that having an ally in Tanner made facing Mark less daunting.

"You need a minute?" he questioned with a look of concern.

Kristy shook her head, a short, jerky motion that set her curls bouncing. "I just want to get ready for the lunch crowd," she said, but her voice came out thin—a thread instead of a rope. She pulled away from the counter, avoiding Tanner's eyes, and with the practiced efficiency of someone who'd spent years running on adrenaline, she started prepping for midday in earnest.

She was everywhere at once, yanking fresh espresso beans to the grinder, refilling the creamers, and hustling the pastry racks from cooler to display. She wiped down every visible surface—then wiped them again, her hands moving with force bordering on aggression. The scent of disinfectant started to overpower the nutty warmth of roasting beans.

But even as she worked, Mark's words stuck to her skin like spilled syrup. Every time she caught her reflection in the chrome of an espresso machine or the glass of the bakery case, she imagined him behind her, smirking, waiting for her to screw up. Every step she took echoed with his voice, "Didn't realize you'd traded scrubs for an apron." The old resentment and humiliation crawled up her throat in equal measure.

She tried to bury herself in the rush. By eleven-thirty, the shop was crammed again. Orders barked out in rapid succession—two iced lattes, caramel drizzle, one oat-milk chai, three shots, no foam—and Kristy became a machine built for service, handing off drinks with a smile, even as her hands shook each time some rude customer snapped their fingers.

Tanner, for his part, kept half an eye on the door but did not hover, a silent, steady

presence at the edge of her vision. Whenever the line dipped, he loitered near the sink, rinsing cups that Kristy could've sworn were already clean.

The hour ticked by at a crawl, and with every drink order, Kristy felt the sweat build along her hairline, pooling at the base of her neck, slicking her palms until she had to dry them on her apron every few minutes. Even the regulars noticed. Mrs. Espinoza, who always came for a single decaf and half a cinnamon roll at lunch, reached over the counter and gave Kristy's forearm a gentle squeeze. "You okay, mija? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Kristy blinked, then gave a watery laugh. "Just busy," she said and tried to believe it. "Thanks for checking in."

When the bustle finally ebbed, and she had a moment to breathe, Kristy retreated to the back corner. She put her head in her hands and tried to slow her breathing. She wasn't about to cry in the middle of the shop, not now, not ever. She counted to ten. Usually, that was all it took for her to stuff an encounter with Mark in a box and padlock it, but this time, it didn't seem to work.

She didn't hear Tanner approach. He moved like he was still on a call—quiet, precise, taking up just as much space as he needed. He sat down across from her, not close enough to crowd her but close enough to be a barrier against the rest of the shop.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

She kept her head down. "Not really."

"Fine," Tanner said. He sat back. Waited. She could feel the weight of his attention, heavy but not pressing.

After a minute, she gave up. “That was Mark,” she said. “My ex.”

Tanner didn’t respond, just waited.

She started talking, and once she started, she couldn’t stop. “We dated for two years. He made me feel like nothing was ever good enough. He didn’t like how much I worked. He said I cared too much. That I should be more like him, just clock in, clock out, don’t get involved. Whenever I’d lose a patient or come home wiped from back-to-back close calls, he’d say I was being dramatic. That I was weak.” She looked up at the hero wall, at all those faces. “He’s the reason I left nursing. Or part of it. I was tired of being told I couldn’t handle it.”

Tanner’s gaze didn’t waver. “From what I can tell, you seem to be able to handle worse than him.”

“Doesn’t feel like it,” she admitted.

Tanner was quiet, the way only someone who’s heard confessions before can be. “He’s wrong about you.”

She laughed, but it sounded brittle. “You don’t even know me that well.”

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Tanner shrugged. "I know, but I do know what it looks like when someone gets knocked down and stands up anyway. Saw it on the force. Seen it in here with so many first responders."

She wiped at her eyes, annoyed at herself. "I thought leaving him, leaving the hospital, would be a clean break. But he's still in my head. Every mistake I make, every time I drop something, I hear him. Telling me I'm not cut out for anything good."

Tanner said nothing for a long moment. Then, finally shared, "I used to be good at what I did, too. After the accident, I couldn't even make a sandwich without dropping the knife. It took months to do stairs without thinking I'd eat pavement."

Kristy stared at him. "But you look fine now."

He grinned, sharp and self-deprecating. "It's all smoke and mirrors. You patch it up and move on. Some days, it works. Some days, not so much."

They sat in the silence, not awkward, just shared. Kristy let the words soak in. She realized he wasn't judging her. He wasn't even trying to fix it. He was just...there.

She took a long, shaky breath. "He's going to come back. He always does."

"This is my place, which means I reserve the right to refuse service to anyone."

She laughed, this time with some warmth. "What are you going to do, threaten to arrest him?"

“Only if he tries to mansplain how to prepare our lemon loaf again.”

She shook her head. “He’s a jerk but not dangerous.”

Tanner’s eyes flashed. “You don’t have to deal with jerks on your own. You’re not alone anymore.”

It sounded so simple. But it was the most radical thing anyone had said to her in months.

She pushed up from the chair. “I should get back to work. Daisy’s probably about to start a union if I’m gone too long.”

Tanner stood as well. “You good?”

She squared her shoulders and found her balance. “Yeah. Thanks.”

He nodded. “Anytime.”

They walked back to the counter together, and Kristy felt lighter than she had all day. She picked up a pitcher and went back to making life better, one cup at a time.

Chapter Six

Tanner prided himself on being first to the coffee shop. This morning, he went about his normal routine, opening the front door and clicking on the lights. But when he heard the familiar sound of Kristy’s humming drifting from behind the counter, he was startled. He found her underneath Daisy, curly hair bunched up in a bandana and cheeks already smudged with cinnamon. She didn’t notice him, not until he cleared his throat.

“You’re here before me.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d get in here and do some detail cleaning,” Kristy explained, flashing a smile. “Daisy missed me, anyway.”

He didn’t smile back, but he didn’t have to. She went back to cleaning, and he made his way to the back to pay bills.

Then, at 6:01, the world changed. The front door banged open with a force that could’ve shattered glass if someone else was holding the knob. She was small, maybe five-three, and carried herself like she had diplomatic immunity from all social norms. Black hair, cut to her chin, with the kind of bounce that only comes from a salon or severe genetic luck. Her leatherjacket looked too expensive for Clear Mountain. Her boots, like they’d survived a motorcycle crash.

She paused in the entrance, scanned the shop, and zeroed in on Tanner like a missile. He stood behind the counter, braced for whatever came next.

“Hi,” the woman said. “You must be Tanner Blaze.”

“That’s me,” Tanner acknowledged.

He felt Kristy’s curious gaze from beside him and noticed she pulled off her bandana and patted her curls into place.

The woman smiled, sharp and fast. “Emily Merlot. Brave Badge corporate. I’m here to evaluate your location, make assessments, and provide recommendations.”

Tanner’s gut clenched. He’d gotten the warning from Joe Griffin—an “internal evaluator” coming to observe—but he had hoped it had been a bluff. Apparently, Joe didn’t make idle threats, and Emily Merlot standing in his coffee shop was proof of

that.

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Kristy stuck out a hand. “I’m Kristy Howard. I’m one of the baristas here.”

Emily shook the other woman’s hand, then turned right back to Tanner. “Where’s your morning shift? Just you two?”

“Rhonda’s late. Her car hates the cold,” Kristy offered.

Emily nodded and pulled a tablet from her messenger bag. She propped it on the counter and tapped the screen like she was swiping away a personal enemy. “Let’s start with a walk-through,” she said.

“Do you want a drink?” Kristy tried, gesturing at the machine. “We have a new dark roast?—”

“I’ll take a medium latte. Extra shot. No sugar,” Emily answered, eyes still on the tablet. “And I want to see how you handle a high-maintenance order.”

Kristy shot a glance at Tanner, then went to work. Her hands were steady, but Tanner could tell she was overthinking every motion.

Emily did not wait to be shown around. She strode behind the counter, barely pausing for Kristy to move out of her path, and started opening cabinets, sniffing the milk, tapping at the register. “You do your own maintenance on the equipment?” she inquired.

Tanner nodded. “Mostly, unless it’s a full breakdown.”

She made a note and then checked the under-sink storage. “You have a lot of cleaning products down here. Does OSHA know you’re stockpiling the world’s chlorine supply?”

Tanner bristled just a little. “We keep it clean.”

Emily grinned, apparently satisfied. “So I see. No rats or bugs. Good start.” She turned to Kristy, who was finishing up the latte. “You always steam the milk first, or do you multitask?”

Kristy blinked. “It depends on the drink?—”

“Efficiency is money. Multitasking is best,” Emily told her, already glancing back at her notes.

She walked to the customer area and flicked a finger over every table, checking for stickiness, then went to the restrooms and spent an uncomfortably long time in each. She returned and ordered a scone, but only to test how quickly Kristy could cut and plate it.

Tanner followed her from a distance, feeling more and more like he was being cross-examined. When the first customer—a firefighter in a navy blue jacket—walked in, Emily intercepted him at the door.

“Welcome to Brave Badge,” she chirped, holding out her hand. “Can you tell me what you like most about this shop?”

The firefighter looked at her as if she were asking for a kidney but shrugged. “The coffee’s hot. Staff’s not stuck-up. Place has better donuts than the station.”

“Good,” she nodded, writing it down. She left him at the counter and returned to the

bar, where Kristy handed over the latte with a trembling flourish.

Emily sipped it, then nodded at Kristy. “You tamp too hard. Makes the espresso a little bitter. Otherwise, perfect.”

Kristy blushed, but the compliment was real. “Thanks.”

Tanner couldn’t decide if he wanted to hurl Emily out the window or ask her to take over for a week and fix everything that bugged him. She worked like a detective with a time bomb strapped to her chest—never pausing, never softening her voice.

Emily checked the break room, the supply closet, and his office. At 6:47, Rhonda arrived. She took one look at Emily and muttered, “Oh, geez. Corporate,” under her breath, then slunk to the back room.

“Who handles daily reports?” Emily asked, tapping at her screen.

“I do,” Tanner told her.

She handed him the tablet, already loaded with a spreadsheet. “Yesterday’s close-out doesn’t match your POS numbers. Can you explain?”

Tanner scanned the totals. She was right. There was a forty-dollar gap, maybe a till error, maybe a comped drink, or an unlogged cash sale. He started to answer, but Emily was already on to the next thing.

“And your inventory is off. You’re down two bags of beans since Monday. Do you sample that much, or is it going out the back?”

He clenched his jaw. “I’ll check it.”

Emily smiled like a cat who'd found a mouse in a cookie jar. "Please do."

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She made her way to the seating area and watched as the morning regulars trickled in. Her gaze was clinical, noting the way customers shuffled the chairs, how long they lingered, whether anyone actually read the “Hero Story” cards at each table.

She caught a kid with sticky hands trying to wipe them on the hero wall. “Hey, bud,” she called. “Can you find your favorite picture on that wall for me?” She crouched down, her voice getting soft, and the kid was instantly on board, showing her the photo of a K9 team Tanner remembered from his own SAR days.

She was ruthless but not unkind. Even so, every note she made felt like a personal attack.

By 7:05, the shop was full. Kristy and Rhonda tag-teamed the rush. Tanner ran backup, pulling drip and busing tables, all while feeling Emily’s eyes on him every time he exhaled.

She never missed anything. When a customer waited too long for a pastry, she clocked it to the second. When Kristy fumbled a to-go lid, Emily was there, timing the recovery.

Finally, at 8:10, she returned to the counter. “Can we have a sit-down at ten?” she asked. “I want to review some process questions and go over your goals for the next quarter.”

“Sure,” Tanner said, though his voice came out a full octave lower than normal.

When she walked away, Kristy gave him a look. “She’s intense,” she whispered.

“She’s a shark,” Tanner corrected. “And she smells blood.”

Kristy smirked. “Good thing you’re the biggest fish in here.”

He almost laughed. Almost.

The rest of the morning was a blur of orders and side-eye glances at Emily, who spent her time scanning reports and making quiet calls to someone higher up the chain. At exactly 9:59, she reappeared at the counter, her latte cup empty and the sleeve lined with neat, careful notes.

“Ready?” she asked.

Tanner nodded, but his stomach was twisting.

He followed her to the window booth, where she’d arranged her tablet and a legal pad like it was a miniature war room. She gestured for him to sit, then dove right in.

“Let’s start with product mix,” Emily said, tapping the screen. “You’re selling more drip than specialty. Is that by design, or just a lack of training on the espresso side?”

Tanner’s mind raced. “It’s what the regulars want. Mostly cops, firefighters, SAR guys—they don’t want froth, just caffeine.”

Emily nodded, writing this down. “But specialty drinks have a bigger margin. Could you nudge sales with a promo?”

“Maybe,” he muttered, but he felt defensive.

She flipped to the next page on her screen. “Customer retention is good. But you have too many comped drinks and ‘on the house’ transactions. I’m guessing that’s a

community thing?”

Tanner hesitated. “We comp for first responders if they’re in uniform or coming off a bad shift.”

She nodded again, not unsympathetic. “It’s admirable. But if you want to keep this place running, you need to tighten up. Even heroes pay for coffee eventually.”

He didn’t answer right away. It went against everything he stood for to make those who put their lives on the line pay for coffee. “Giving my fellow first responders a free drink is the least I can do for what they give up on a regular basis.”

“I know this is hard, but you’re going to have to make some adjustments. What if you offered a punch card for loyalty? We have a template if you’re interested. And instead of a full comp, you could consider a discount amount, say 10-20%,” she suggested.

“I’ll consider it,” he told her through gritted teeth.

Emily’s questions kept coming, rapid-fire: Why weren’t they doing more on social media? Why had they discontinued the Tuesday breakfast burrito special? Why was inventory so high but sales flat? For every answer he gave, she countered with a suggestion, a metric, or a gentle challenge to his logic.

She leaned back, tapping her pen. “Look, Tanner. You’re doing good work. But you’re running this like a clubhouse, not a business. I need you to find three areas to improve by the end of the quarter.”

He bristled but nodded. “I can do that.”

He sat in the booth for a long minute after she went back to work on her laptop,

staring at the hero wall at the photo of himself, half-smiling and alive. Then he got up, rolled his shoulders, and went back to work.

By eleven-forty, Brave Badge was a war zone. Tanner manned the register with one hand and slammed the espresso portafilter with the other. Every time he glanced up, there were four more people in line, each with their own dietary restrictions, each more urgent than the last.

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Kristy worked the front with a speed that bordered on the supernatural. “Who’s next for caffeine and poor life choices?” she’d shout, her voice somehow reaching both ends of the shop and cutting through the noise. Her smile didn’t falter. She traded jokes with the regulars, smuggled extra cookies to cranky toddlers, and always managed to be exactly where someone needed her at any given second.

Tanner tried to match her pace, but he was fraying at the edges. The register kept sticking on cash transactions. Someone had spilled a bottle of syrup, turning the bar floor into a skating rink. There was a shortage of clean mugs. Every time a ticket printed, he felt his pulse spike.

Somewhere in the background, Emily sat in a corner booth, eyes locked on her tablet and the controlled chaos around her. She didn’t talk to anyone. She just watched, logging every botched order, every minute someone waited in line, every time a customer left with a frown instead of a smile.

By 12:45, the lunch rush ebbed to a trickle. Tanner’s shirt was clinging to his back, and his hands shook when he tried to pour himself a glass of water. He caught Kristy glancing at him, concern in her eyes, but he just shrugged it off and wiped down the counter with extra force.

Emily set her tablet aside and beckoned them both along with Rhonda with a two-fingered gesture. “Five minutes,” she told them. “Window table.”

Tanner nearly ordered her to wait, but Kristy was already in motion, heading to the big table by the window. The light spilled over the laminate, making everything look harsher.

Emily didn't waste time. She slid the tablet to the center and tapped the screen, bringing up a series of graphs, charts, and color-coded blocks.

"Let's talk performance," she started. "You're selling out the pastry case daily, but your drink margins are abysmal. Yesterday, you wasted more than a pound of beans on mis-pulls and remakes. That's sixty dollars out the window before lunch."

Tanner bristled. "It's a new machine. People are still learning?—"

Emily cut him off. "Then train them. You're not running a charity. Even your best days barely cover overhead."

She turned to Kristy, her tone softening by a fraction. "You're great with customers. But you're taking too long to close out transactions. There are bottlenecks at the pickup bar. We lose efficiency every minute someone has to wait for a to-go order."

Kristy's smile faltered, just a hair. "I'm working on it."

Emily nodded like she'd been expecting the answer. "Good. Because the numbers don't lie, we're at risk of missing projections for the quarter. And that puts your shop in the bottom twenty percent for new franchisees."

Tanner's jaw locked. "We're building a base. The town isn't even at peak season yet."

Emily flicked to the next slide. "That's an excuse. You know who doesn't make excuses? Our Glenwood Springs and Aspen. They started out smaller, but they're both doubling your per-customer ticket within the first six months."

"Those towns aren't like this one," Tanner shot back. "Clear Mountain isn't some ski bum paradise. Most of our customers are just trying to keep the lights on right now."

Emily smiled, but it was a brittle thing. “Maybe. But they’re still choosing you. And you have to give them a reason to come back.” She folded her hands, the picture of businesslike composure. “Which brings me to your shop’s vibe. It’s...fine, but it’s stale. There’s no identity. You’re not the quirky hangout, you’re not the high-end spot, and you’re not even the only place in town with free Wi-Fi. What makes Brave Badge different?”

Tanner opened his mouth, but Kristy beat him to it. “The hero wall,” she asserted. “The way we remember people. The way we actually know our customers’ names. That’s the difference.”

Emily arched an eyebrow. “It’s not enough. Not if you want to keep the doors open.”

She let that hang for a moment, then swiped to a layout mockup on her screen. “I propose a new workflow. Move the register to the left, increase the prep space, push the pastry display closer to the entrance. Create a clear path for to-go customers. Streamline the back bar so no one has to reach over each other.”

Tanner’s fists clenched under the table. “That’s not going to work. It took me weeks to get this setup right. You don’t even know the building?—”

Emily looked at him, her gaze as cold as her tone. “I ran my own location for two years, and I managed a location for another one, plus did audits on another half-dozen, which is why Joe asked me to do this. I’ve seen every version of these problems, and I’ve fixed most of them. If you don’t trust me, trust the data. Or you’ll be on a list for ‘possible restructure’ by Christmas.”

Kristy coughed into her hand, then asked, “Do we really need to change everything? Can’t we just improve what we have?”

Emily softened her voice, but only slightly. “You can’t fix a sinking ship by bailing

faster. Sometimes, you have to patch the hull.”

That was it. Tanner snapped. He stood, palms flat on the table. “This is my shop. I built it. I know what works for Clear Mountain, and it’s not another chain with plastic smiles and fake personalities. We’re real. We make mistakes, but we own them.”

Emily didn’t flinch. “Then, own the financials. Because right now, you’re burning cash, not earning it.”

Tanner’s face was red hot by this time. “You want to run the place, be my guest. But I’m not gutting what I made just to hit some corporate target.”

Emily stood, too. She was shorter, but her presence filled the table. “That’s exactly what you have to do, unless you want to see your dream fail inside a year.”

The two of them locked eyes. No one spoke.

Kristy broke the silence. “Maybe we could try some of the suggestions for a couple of weeks. See if they work. If not, we can always go back?”

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Emily nodded, but her gaze stayed locked on Tanner. “That’s a reasonable approach. Are you willing to give it a shot?”

Tanner wanted to say no. He wanted to throw the tablet out the window or tell Joe to shove it and just let his coffee shop die on his terms. But he looked at Kristy, at her hopeful face, and her hands twisted in front of her, and he knew he couldn’t do it.

He exhaled. “Fine. We’ll try it your way. But if it makes things worse, we do it my way from then on.”

Emily smiled, almost genuinely this time. “Deal.”

She sat back down, pulled out a printout, and slid it across the table. “Here’s the new workflow. Let’s start tomorrow morning.”

Tanner didn’t sit. He grabbed the paper and stalked away from the table, the heat in his chest spreading all the way to his fingertips.

Behind him, he heard Kristy say, “He’s not usually like that. He just...cares.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve worked with worse. Grumpy ex-cops come with the territory when you’re dealing with Brave Badge locations.”

In the back room, Tanner found himself staring at the wall. He punched it once, just hard enough to leave a mark. He didn’t care about the pain. He cared about losing the only thing that made sense anymore. He hated to admit it, but Emily had a point. He was bleeding money, and if something didn’t change, he was going to lose this place.

The afternoon was slow. Kristy pretended to clean the coffee bar, but really, she just wiped the same spot over and over. Tanner felt her eyes on him, hovering at the edge of his vision. He didn't want to talk. Not now.

Emily worked at her corner booth. Every so often, she'd look up and catch him watching, then go right back to typing on her tablet. At two-thirty, she stood and stretched. Walked the perimeter of the shop again, as if she owned it.

When she reached the counter, she leaned in. "Can we talk? Just you and me."

Tanner didn't answer. But he followed her to the window booth anyway.

She opened a folder and set a single sheet between them. "This is the three-month projection if things keep going at the current rate," she said, tapping the paper.

He didn't look at the numbers. He didn't need to. He already knew how bad it was. He watched her eyes, steady and dark. He tried to hate her, but it was hard. She was just doing her job. He'd have done the same—once, long ago.

"If we lose another ten percent, Brave Badge will terminate your contract," she said. "The decision comes from higher up. I'm not the villain here."

Tanner picked up the paper. The numbers blurred. He dropped it back onto the table.

"So what?" he questioned. "You want me to gut the whole shop? Fire Rhonda for having car problems? Make Kristy do double shifts for minimum wage?"

"No," Emily shook her head. "I want you to think about what you're willing to fight for and what you're willing to change so you can win."

Tanner almost laughed. "You think I'm afraid of a fight?"

She shook her head. “I think you’re afraid of letting people down. That’s not the same.”

Kristy materialized at the edge of the table, a mug in her hand. “Can I get you anything?” Her voice was light, but her eyes were fixed on him, searching.

Tanner didn’t answer. He didn’t trust himself not to break something if he opened his mouth.

Emily took the mug and sipped. “Thank you, Kristy. You’re doing great.”

Kristy looked at Tanner, waiting for him to say something. He just stared at the table.

Emily slid the sheet across the table, closer to him. “Read it,” she insisted.

He did. The numbers were worse than he expected. A slow, steady bleed—expenses, losses, projections in red. There was a list at the bottom: Possible Cost-Cutting Measures.

It was everything he hated. Raising prices. Diluting the menu. Shortening the hours of operation. He felt bile in his throat.

“Is this what Joe wants?” he probed.

Emily nodded. “It’s what will keep the shop open. For now. Things can change down the road, but we need to figure out what to do now to keep this place open.”

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He stood, the paper still in his hand, a wrinkled white flag of surrender. As he walked out the front door, he did his best to hold it together. He found a bench by the park and sat, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing. He'd never failed at anything this badly.

Tanner stayed there until the sun went down. When he finally headed home, the shop was dark. Kristy's car was still in the lot. He almost went back inside. Almost.

But he couldn't face her. Not with his head and heart empty of platitudes.

He drove home in silence. His apartment was small, too clean, and colder than he remembered. He tossed his keys on the table and dropped into a chair. The Brave Badge reports, bills, and invoices littered the tabletop. He pushed them aside and found himself staring at an old photo in a cheap frame.

It was him, in uniform, standing next to the Chief and two of his old SAR buddies. They were grinning, wind-burned and alive. That was before the accident. Before everything changed.

He set the photo down, face down. He didn't want to remember.

He thought about Kristy and Rhonda, and all the regulars who'd made the Brave Badge theirs. He thought about the emptyspace on Main Street if he lost the shop and how little there would be left for him here.

He laid his head on the table and closed his eyes. The shop would open tomorrow, and he'd have to face them all. But for tonight, he let himself wallow in his own

defeat.

Chapter Seven

Kristy arrived at the Brave Badge an hour before opening; her optimism squashed flatter than the bagel she'd sat on in the car on the way over. The sky was still pink and groggy. Her breath fogged in the cold, even inside the Corolla, and she had to fumble her keys twice before the front door gave way.

She noticed nothing was done and made her way through the shop: lights, check. Tables and chairs, check. Cash register—wait. The register drawer was open, the small safe next to it ajar, a band of invoices coiled around the handle. Someone had been here before her. Only one person made sense.

She walked toward the back, every step a little heavier than the last. The office door was propped open by an empty crate, and inside, she found Tanner at the back, arms braced on the edge of his desk, head hanging between his shoulders. It was an odd pose. Not rage, not collapse. More like a boxer in his corner after too many rounds.

He didn't notice her at first, so she watched. He kept folding and unfolding a single piece of paper, creasing it until the edges curled in. Next to him, a neat stack of documents—bills, contracts, a Brave Badge manual marked up in red ink. His phone lay face up, screen dark.

“Hey,” Kristy said, voice meant to be casual but coming out too loud. “Everything all right?”

Tanner jerked upright and almost knocked the crate with his foot. He forced a straight face, but the effect was ruined by the heavy bags under his eyes and the fact that he hadn't shaved. “Yeah, just had some stuff to do.”

“You want coffee? I can start a batch.” She was already at the grinder, Daisy ready and waiting, as Tanner followed behind her.

“Don’t go to the trouble,” Tanner mumbled, but he said it too late, and she ignored him.

She poured beans into the hopper, each clatter too loud in the silent shop. Daisy whirred to life. Kristy stared at the wall as she worked, forcing her hands to move with the same precision as always. It was the only thing keeping her from asking the questions already boiling in her brain.

She finished two mugs, poured the first for him, and set it on the prep table with a careful slide. “Here, drink,” she ordered. “You look like you need it.”

He reached for the cup, knuckles white, and drank. Then he set the mug down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thanks.”

She watched him, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “It’s fine. Just numbers.” He gestured to the stack.

“Okay,” she shrugged, but not moving. “Because yesterday you looked ready to throw someone through a window, and today you’re acting like you just got the news from the vet that your dog didn’t make it.”

He almost smiled, but not quite. “It’s not your problem, Kristy. You don’t have to fix everything.”

She shrugged. “That’s the first time anyone’s ever told me not to try fixing things.” She let the silence hang. “What’s wrong?”

Tanner stood there, jaw set, and she thought maybe he was going to clam up for good. Then he sighed and slid the wrinkled piece of paper her way. She took it. It was a statement from the bank. Overdrawn. Minus sign, three digits, more minus signs.

He didn't say anything, so she picked up the rest of the stack. Rent invoice—three months behind. Supply invoice, overdue, with a red pen line through “net 30.” A memo from Brave Badge headquarters: “Evaluation period is two weeks. Failure to meet benchmarks will result in removal of branding.”

Kristy's brain went white for a second like she'd gotten a faceful of snow. “Oh,” she murmured. “Wow. How long?—”

“I thought I could dig out,” Tanner said, and this time, his voice had an edge. “But sales never caught up, and I kept comping drinks for fellow first responders, and then that last freezer repair—” He snapped his fingers, abrupt. “Doesn't matter. Emily said we've got until the end of the month, then Joe pulls the plug.”

Kristy looked at the top page, then the bottom. There was no hope buried in the middle, just more disappointment. “You should have said something,” she told him. “We could've tried something, I don't know?—“

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Tanner laughed, but it was a broken sound. “Tried what? Sell my truck? Fire Rhonda, and have you run the whole shop solo?”

“Maybe,” Kristy blurted, then caught herself. “I mean, no, but—there’s always something. Have you tried fundraising? Or a GoFundMe? Or some kind of community event? You know every cop and firefighter in town. Can’t you just call them and make them drink more coffee?”

He shook his head, and for once, he looked older than she’d ever seen him, every line in his face deeper than usual. “I don’t want to beg. I started this to give people a place. If I can’t keep it running on my own, what’s the point?”

Kristy could have smacked him. She settled for slapping her notepad on the table, flipping to a clean page. “First of all, you’re not on your own. Second, people here don’t care about pride. They care about coffee and carbs and not having to go to a chain to get either. Third, it’s only two weeks, right?”

He grunted.

“That’s more than enough,” she told him and started writing. “Listen. The hospital used to do this all the time—someone gets cancer, everyone rallies around them, bake sale, silent auction, go bald for a cause, the works. We just have to treat this like an emergency. We triage. We recruit. We put out a call.”

Tanner blinked. “A call?”

“Yeah. Like when you’re short-staffed,

and everyone scrambles to fill the gaps.” She looked up at him, pen poised. “This is what you taught me, Blaze. When the chips are down, you lean on your team. You think I can’t throw together an event in a couple of days?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. She saw the hope flicker there, thin as it was.

Kristy chewed on the end of her pen. “Okay, what’s the biggest event we could throw with zero budget and maximum attention?”

He stared at her like she was the crazy one now, but after a minute, he started answering. “First responder appreciation. Chili cook-off. Pie eating contest. Those always packed out at the station.”

She nodded, scribbling. “Good. What else?”

He shrugged. “There’s a town council meeting tomorrow. If you get someone on the agenda, you could get the mayor to plug it.”

Kristy grinned. “Even better. We’ll get Rhonda to make her ‘accidentally loaded’ muffins. She can guilt the council into showing up.”

He shook his head, but this time, it was almost a smile. “You think that’ll work?”

She clicked her pen, determined. “It’s better than nothing. Unless you want to just close the doors and let Emily win?”

Tanner’s jaw worked. He said nothing for a while. Then, softly, “I hate this. I hate asking for help.”

Kristy set her pen down and slid the pad over so he could see it. “It’s not about you, Blaze. It’s about us. This place is the only thing keeping half this town from losing it

on any given day. You don't get to decide if it's worth saving. We do."

He stared at the page, then at her. For the first time since she'd walked in, his eyes actually met hers. He didn't say thank you, but he didn't have to.

She poured him another cup, black as always, and set it in front of him.

"You're not alone in this. We're going to do everything we can to save this place together."

He picked up the mug. His hands weren't shaking anymore. "Okay. Let's do it."

She smiled, real this time, and started the list. People to call. Flyers to make. Stories to leak to the Gazette. She hadn't fixed anything yet, but she could see the outline, clear as a sunbeam on snow.

She watched Tanner out of the corner of her eye as she scribbled down ideas, and she saw something shift there. Not quite hope. But close enough to fake it, for now.

She kept her phone on the bar and her hand on a Sharpie. Between tasks, she scribbled new ideas or scratched out the weak ones. "I like the idea of a punch card. What if we do one, and after ten drinks, the eleventh is free?" she suggested, stacking cups behind the register. "Or a social media contest. Whoever posts the best 'hero story' gets, I don't know, a month of free drip coffee?"

Tanner, fixing a wobble in the front leg of a stool, grunted. "What if no one participates in the contest?"

"Then I'll post a hundred times myself," she told him, not missing a beat. "You ever seen my Instagram? I can fake an entire crowd with some cardboard cutouts and a dog in a bandana."

He made a face like he wanted to disagree but didn't.

Kristy worked the morning rush, moving at double speed. Whenever there was a lull, she started calling. First up was Aiden. She put it on speaker.

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“Blaze,” Aiden answered, “Is everything okay?”

“It’s Kristy,” she said, “but yes, everything’s fine—unless you count the fate of the Brave Badge hanging in the balance. Can you make it to an emergency meeting tonight? Seven sharp.”

Aiden didn’t even pause. “I’ll be there. Do you need Lindsay to come?”

“Bring everyone you can,” she encouraged. “We need brains and muscle. And snacks.”

“Copy that. We’ll see you tonight.”

Next was Hayley Hall Bishop, the owner of the local paper, who picked up and started talking before Kristy even said hello. “Hey, I’m about to go in to work, so make it quick.”

“Can you swing by the Brave Badge tonight at seven? It’s urgent. Like, possible-life-or-death-for-this-place urgent.”

Hayley’s tone sharpened. “What’s wrong?”

Kristy told her the fast, short version and waited.

Hayley didn’t sugarcoat. “Do you have a spreadsheet with numbers? Or are we just brainstorming?”

“I’ll have everything ready. Can you bring some of your newspaper crew and your husband’s SWAT team? They all drink caffeine like water, so they know the value of this place.”

“I’ll try. But you owe me a good story to pitch them with.”

Kristy grinned. “I guarantee this will be front-page news.”

Call three: Zach Turner. He answered with, “What’s up, Kristy?”

“Operation Save the Badge is a go,” she stated in a conspiracy-laden tone. “Can you make it to the BB at seven tonight?”

“Only if there are donuts,” he teased. “But yeah. I’ll bring Erica. She knows some people with cash. Should I wear my uniform or go incognito?”

“Uniform, obviously. We need all the hero cred we can get to get the civilians on board. Spread the word.”

“You got it. See you then.” Click.

As her final move, she grabbed her phone and fired off a rapid group text to everyone else she knew in town.

“Hey heroes, emergency meeting at BB tonight. 7:00p.m. Be there, or I’ll steal your badges.”

She set the phone down, then snapped open the dry-erase marker and scribbled “Fundraiser Planning Tonight” on the counter whiteboard, adding little siren emojis for effect.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Kristy poured more coffee than she thought physically possible. Every order was a chance to drop hints about the event: “Tell your friends.” “Bring your family.” “There will be cookies and coffee.” She taped flyers to the to-go cups, then to the front window, then to the nearby light posts around the park.

Tanner watched her for a long time. At first, he kept to the back, eyes dark, but by noon, he started catching her ideas and tossing them back. “If you want to get the firehouse on board, you need to bribe them with breakfast burritos,” he informed her, topping off a customer’s cup. “It’s the only food group they trust.”

“Done,” Kristy said, writing it down.

“And make sure the bake sale isn’t just sweet stuff. People buy out the savory stuff first. Meat pies, sausage rolls—anything with cheese sells out before the brownies.”

She scribbled, “Tons of CHEESE,” in all caps, then looked up at him. “You’re good at this, you know.”

He shrugged, but she saw the small, proud twist at the corner of his mouth. “We all pitched in for community events.”

By two, Kristy had filled three pages in her notepad and had already started a fourth. She spent the last hour before closing prepping a box of sample pastries, “for bribery,” she told Rhonda, who responded by baking two extra lemon loaves and pre-slicing them into squares for “maximum snackability.”

By 4:00 p.m., the place had emptied out. Tanner counted the register, his posture a little taller than it was that morning. Kristy cleaned the bar with a kind of energy that only came from pure adrenaline and the knowledge that, tonight, they might actually have a chance.

She looked at the clock. Three hours was just enough time to get everything ready for the meeting. She pushed the tables into a big, awkward circle. The pastry case was cleared and refilled with leftover muffins, cheese rolls, and one “emergency cake” from the back freezer. A whiteboard sat at the head of the formation, the bottom lined with markers and more dry-erase stains than clean space. She’d brewed three giant carafes of coffee, each labeled “Mild,” “Leadfoot,” and “High-Octane Deathwish.”

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Tanner hovered by the window, arms crossed but less in defense and more in awe. He watched as Kristy prepped for theonslaught, balancing five mugs in one hand and a notepad in the other. She moved with the energy of a field medic prepping a trauma bay before a disaster. If she had to fight for this place, she'd do it at top volume and with snacks.

The first to arrive was Aiden. He walked in like he was reporting for duty—clean jeans, fresh shirt, SAR jacket zipped midway up his chest. Next to him, Lindsay wore yoga pants and an insulated vest, hand tucked tight in his. They took seats together, Aiden instantly surveying the room like he was prepping a briefing, Lindsay snagging the best view of the whiteboard.

Zach arrived next, dragging the cold in with him, a ball cap pulled down over his hair, and a T-shirt that read, “Caffeine is my Password.” Erica was beside him, all business in a black suit, heels clicking against the old wood. She set her bag down and started pulling out folders and a thin MacBook. “I know how important this is,” she called out with a grin, “I ditched a board meeting for this.”

Hayley and Connor came as a pair, but that was where the similarity stopped. Hayley breezed in, scarf flapping, notepad already open, and pen in hand. She scanned the room, searching for gossip, intrigue, or both. Connor followed with measured steps, hands in jacket pockets, the cop in him never fully at rest. His eyes swept the perimeter, then settled on the nearest chair to the door.

Kristy kept looking up at the clock. She felt like every minute was an hour, and every hour was a month off the shop's life expectancy. Several more town members arrived and took seats with the rest of the group. The place became so full that Kristy almost

missed the last guest—Emily Merlot—who slipped in quietly and took a seat in the far corner, back to the wall, tablet at the ready.

At exactly 7:10, after greeting everyone, Kristy tapped a fork against her mug. “Thanks for coming, everyone,” she started, voice a shade too loud. “You all know what’s going on. The Brave Badge is in trouble. Big trouble.”

Tanner flinched, but she pushed on. “We have two weeks to turn this around. I know you all have jobs, lives, and families, but if this place closes, it’s not just us out of work. It’s a hole in the town. The regulars, the crews, the students—they lose their spot. And, honestly, I lose the only place that’s ever made me feel like I could breathe.”

Aiden nodded, already on board. “What’s the plan?”

Kristy inhaled, then riffled through her notepad. “Here’s what I got, but I need everyone’s help. We need to run at least three events, one every few days. First Responders Day. A bake sale, but with a twist. Maybe a car wash or something. We need every social channel covered. If anyone can think of a way to bribe the mayor into showing up, I’m all ears.”

Zach grinned. “He’ll do anything for free coffee and a selfie.”

“Noted,” Kristy murmured as she wrote down to add a photo op station at each event. “Zach, could you organize the car wash?”

He gave her a thumbs-up. “Consider it scrubbed.”

Nurse Gomez raised her hand. “What about hospital staff? You know better than anyone night shifts run on caffeine. If you can get us a deal on group orders, we’ll make it rain coffee runs. I can hit every nurse’s break room with flyers and samples.”

Kristy lit up, grateful for her former co-worker's support. "Yes, I'll make a flyer tonight. I'll bake a test batch of the scone-of-the-day, and you can bring it in with the details."

Aiden leaned in, his voice all command now. "We can put up a banner at the SAR shed. And my team will volunteer for any manual labor or event setup. You need tents? Grills? Done."

Erica, barely looking up from her laptop, chimed in. "I'll do a funding match for any donations. No limit." She shrugged at the group's surprise. "It's a tax write-off, not to mention a great cause."

Hayley snapped her pen in half by accident, but the drama fit. "I'll put a feature in the Gazette. Maybe run a daily thermometer to track the fundraising. People love those. If you can leak me some 'shop in peril' details, even better."

Connor cleared his throat. "I'll handle security. If any pranksters or teenagers try to sabotage an event, I'll make sure they regret it."

There was a wave of laughter. Even Emily smiled at that, or maybe it was just indigestion.

For a moment, Kristy forgot to be nervous. She paced the circle, fielding ideas and jotting everything down. "We need a hashtag and not something lame."

"#SaveTheBadge," Zach offered.

"Too serious," Rhonda snorted. "#EspressoYourself?"

"#BraveTheBean," Hayley added, eyes sparkling.

Lindsay raised a brow. “#CaffeinateTheMountain?”

Erica shook her head. “Just use them all. More hashtags, more reach.”

Kristy agreed, scribbling them down with arrows and exclamation points.

After an hour, the whiteboard looked like a flowchart for a military operation crossed with a bake-off. Everyone had a job, even the Turner twins and O’Connell trio—Lindsay volunteered them to run a lemonade stand at the car wash. There were phone trees, email chains, and a schedule of posts for social media. Kristy had never felt more like she was part of something important.

Near the end, Emily finally spoke up. “You know, most franchises fold because they don’t use their resources. JoeGriffin didn’t send me to close you down. He sent me to see if you’d fight for it. This is the first time since being here that I actually believe you might pull it off.”

Tanner, who’d been silent the whole time, looked up at her. “What changed your mind?”

Emily smiled, a little softer than usual. “Most people whine and complain, but in the end, don’t do anything to fix the problem. You built a team to stand with you before you even opened this place. That’s rare.”

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She nodded at Kristy. “You’re the reason I think it might work. Keep running things like this, and I’ll give you as much time as I can.”

Kristy felt her heart leap up into her face. “Thank you,” she managed and hoped no one could see her eyes go shiny.

As the meeting wound down, Rhonda herded everyone together for a group selfie. “First responders, get in the middle. Kristy, you’re the star. Blaze, try to look happy for once.”

Everyone squeezed in. Tanner hesitated, but Kristy grabbed his sleeve and pulled him closer. “Smile,” she whispered, “or I’ll make you wear a tutu at the car wash.”

He snorted, but the corner of his mouth turned up.

They all raised their coffee mugs for the shot. After the photo, Aiden clapped Tanner on the back. “You got this.”

Lindsay hugged Kristy, then whispered, “You’re a force of nature. He’s lucky to have you.”

Kristy almost told her the truth—that she was terrified, that she’d never saved anything this big before. But instead, she hugged Lindsay tighter and nodded.

The shop emptied out fast. Only Kristy, Tanner, Rhonda, and Emily remained. Emily packed up her tablet and then paused at the door. “I’m rooting for you guys,” she told them with a genuine smile, then left.

“We got this,” Rhonda encouraged as she followed behind. “I’ll see you both in the morning.”

Kristy turned and found Tanner at the window, looking out at the street.

She came to stand next to him. For a moment, neither said anything. Then Tanner exhaled, a sound more relief than exhaustion.

“You really think this will work?” he questioned with concern in his voice.

Kristy looked out at the night, the twinkle lights from Main Street and the stars just starting to sparkle over the mountaintops.

“I think if anyone can make it work, we can. And if not, we’ll at least go down swinging.”

He glanced at her, and she saw the spark again. Not just hope—maybe trust. “Thank you,” he whispered— like it was the hardest thing in the world to say.

She leaned her shoulder against his arm, a tiny nudge. “Don’t thank me yet. Wait until I’ve got you in a tutu.”

He laughed, and it sounded real.

They stood together in the empty shop, looking at the messy tables and the crowded whiteboard, and for the first time, Kristy let herself believe.

Chapter Eight

The next day, the last of the regulars—a trio of high schoolers and the old Vietnam vet who lived for black drip—shuffled out with sleepy goodbyes and promises to “see

you at the car wash.” Rhonda had gone home to “stress-bake” more muffins, which meant tomorrow’s cases would be full of flavors that weren’t even legal in some states.

The shop’s center of gravity shifted until it was just Tanner, Kristy, and Emily. For the first time since the day started, Tanner’s shoulders relaxed. He took a sip of his coffee—lukewarm and bitter, just how he liked it—and made his way to the whiteboard.

“Didn’t think anyone would stick around this late,” he said, nodding at Kristy.

She turned, startled. Her eyes were brighter than usual. “I’m riding the adrenaline wave. If I stop moving, I’ll pass out, and you’ll have to haul me out to my car.”

He snorted. “I’ll drag you by the ankle. Less effort.”

“Just don’t mess up my hair,” she replied, grinning as she shifted a sticky note two inches to the left. The whiteboard was already half-full: headings in block letters “CAR WASH” “BAKESALE” with bullet points and wild arrows scribbled underneath. “Tomorrow, we start on the flyers and set up the event pages. I want the whole county to know.”

He set his mug on the counter, peering at the board. “You really think a car wash and a bake sale are gonna save this place?”

Kristy rolled her eyes. “Not alone, no. But it’s not about the car wash, Blaze. It’s about getting people here. Once they’re in the door, they’ll remember why they like it.” She paused, growing a little more serious. “I know this town. If you ask, they show up.”

He wanted to argue. He always did, with her. But the truth was, she was right. The

meeting had packed the shop wall to wall, and half those people had offered more than he'd ever expected.

He found himself staring, just for a second, at the curl of her hair over her ear, the fleck of blue ink on her cheekbone, the way her eyes moved when she solved a problem. She caught him, and he looked away, picking up his mug. "I can't believe how many people showed up," he said, softer than he meant to.

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Kristy's smile was like the sun through a windshield. "That's what community is about. People care, even if they pretend not to."

Before the moment could stretch into anything awkward, Emily piped up from her lair at the corner table. "You're going to need at least five grand," she called, not looking up from the screen. "If you want to cover payroll and the overdue invoices and get ahead on rent, it's five thousand minimum. Bake sales and lemonade stands aren't going to cut it unless you're planning on selling them at a hundred dollars a pop."

Tanner glanced over. Emily had that cop-detective tone, the one that made every word sound like a verdict. "You always this much fun at parties?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Only the ones I'm being paid to attend."

Kristy walked over, plucked a highlighter from Emily's arsenal, and started scribbling on the legal pad. "So what's your big idea, Corporate?"

Emily arched an eyebrow. "Get the media involved. Make it a spectacle. Use the local hero's angle. Get the hospital, the SAR, and the sheriff's office. Make it impossible for people not to participate."

"Already on it," Kristy replied. She turned to Tanner, eyes wide. "You know the head of the hospital, right? Didn't you save his nephew from a flood or something?"

Tanner grunted. "The kid fell in a drainage ditch. Not exactly a flood."

She rolled her eyes again. “So? Leverage that. Get him to make the first donation. He loves press for the hospital.”

He mulled this over, unwilling to admit it was a good plan.

Kristy leaned over Emily’s shoulder, scanning the spreadsheet. “If we go viral, or at least ‘regional viral,’ and everyone brings a friend or two—plus matching donations from Erica’s network—we can maybe get close to that five grand. But we need something big for the kick-off.”

Tanner squinted at the page, then at Kristy. “You ever run a fundraiser like this before?”

She grinned. “I ran a blood drive in college and made it into a competition with the fraternity down the street. We doubled the goal and got banned from using the student center because we left the carpet full of cupcake sprinkles. So, yeah. I know how to move people.”

He huffed out a breath, not a laugh, but the closest he’d get. “Guess we’re in good hands, then.”

They all paused, the only sound the buzz of the espresso machine in idle mode. Outside, the lights from Main Street painted faint stripes on the Brave Badge’s front glass.

Tanner looked at Kristy, then at Emily, then back at the chaos of sticky notes and half-empty mugs. This wasn’t how he’d planned things. He’d never been good at asking for help, focusing more on being the one to help rather than needing it himself. But if he was going to be stuck in a storm, he was glad to have Kristy on his six.

He reached for the whiteboard, picked up a red marker, and wrote, in big block

letters: “NEVER QUIT.”

Kristy laughed, then high-fived him, her hand warm and sure. Emily just nodded in approval.

For the first time in months, Tanner didn’t feel like the walls were closing in. They were just...waiting. For a fight, he might actually win.

“What about an auction with a dance after?” Kristy suggested. “The hospital has one every year, and it raises a ton of money.”

“You think we can pull one off in this short amount of time?” Tanner questioned with surprise.

Kristy nodded. “Like I said, I’m really great at making magic happen with not very much.”

“That could get you there,” Emily said in an approving tone as she stood up and stretched. “I need to take a phone call, but I’ll be back.”

Tanner and Kristy watched as Emily took off for the back door.

“Remind me, what’s the SAR team’s usual day off?” Kristy asked as she tapped a pen on the counter.

“Thursday,” Tanner told her as he turned to face her. “Why?”

“Thinking of doing a special tasting—have the guys come by, test the new menu for the bake sale, maybe get them to post on social media,” she said, tapping her pen on her teeth. “Word of mouth with those guys is gold.”

He nodded, hiding a grudging respect. Most people underestimated how much clout first responders had in a town like Clear Mountain. Not Kristy. She saw the angles. Sometimes, he wondered what she would've done if she'd stayed at the hospital. Run the place within a year, probably.

She glanced up. "Is this weird for you?"

He paused— mug halfway to the drying rack. "What?"

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“Letting people help. Not being the lone wolf.” She smiled, not a tease but a real question.

He thought about it. About the years he’d spent shutting people out, about how much easier it was to focus on equipment and numbers and never let anyone see the cracks. He shrugged. “Not as weird as I thought it’d be.”

She looked at him, really looked, and he felt that heat again. This time, he didn’t look away.

Before anything else could happen between them, Kristy’s pen ran out of ink. She shook it, then launched it perfectly into the trash, where it clinked off a Coke can and fell in. “I should get a medal for that,” she jested.

“You want a medal for basic recycling?”

“Are you kidding? Have you seen my basketball skills? That’s a career highlight.”

Tanner smiled, real this time. He went to the back for more pens and found a drawer full of Sharpies that Rhonda had been hoarding. He brought the whole cup forward, setting it on the counter between them. “Here. For your next trick.”

She selected a green one and clicked it open. “We need to work on the car wash. What will make it stand out, really get people to turn out for it?”

“What if we partner with the fire department? Use their water hookups—they’ll love showing off the trucks. Plus, they’re always looking for good PR.”

For a second, Kristy just stared, and then her face lit up like she'd discovered a cheat code. "That's...actually brilliant." She scribbled it onto her notepad, then circled it three times. "We can do it on Saturday, post flyers at the high school. Maybe get some of the students to volunteer—if we promise them community service credit and free iced lattes, they'll show." She reached over and slapped his shoulder, just hard enough to make him pretend it didn't sting. "See? I knew you were secretly a genius."

He tried to hide the pride, but it snuck into his posture anyway. "Just spent too many years scrubbing bugs off cruisers. Old habits."

Kristy wrote "CAR WASH—FIRE DEPT PARTNER" in huge letters at the top of the new list, underlining it with a flourish. "You want to MC the event? Maybe do a live demonstration of how to get blood stains out of a uniform?"

He choked on his coffee. "Pass. I'll stick to logistics."

She giggled, and the sound bounced off the empty walls, filling the space with something close to joy.

Rhonda showed back up, arms full of fresh baked goods. "I ran out of room at my place for these. The bake sale is going to do great tomorrow." She dropped them on the counter and then immediately started sorting. "We should feature the 'Brave Blend' tomorrow, too. Highest margin, and it's got the most caffeine. Push the oat milk for the health crowd, and offer kid-sized lemonades to upsell the parents."

Kristy whistled. "Rhonda, where did that come from? Remind me never to play poker against you. You're ruthless."

Rhonda chuckled. "Only when I have to be, and this calls for it. I don't want to lose this place."

They huddled together, poring over numbers and strategies. Emily dissected every angle with calculated logic, but Kristy kept pushing for ideas that would make people smile or at least want to come back for more than just a guilt-donation. Rhonda bridged the gap, translating Emily's corporate jargon into "how to make it work in Clear Mountain." It was the best teamwork he'd experienced since his last SAR call.

Every so often, Kristy would get up and pace, talking through her ideas out loud, gesturing with both hands. Tanner noticed how she'd unconsciously touch the edge of the counter with her fingertips like she needed to stay anchored to something. He wondered if she even realized it.

He also noticed the way she never seemed to lose hope, even when Emily pointed out that most first fundraisers lost money or that the five-thousand-dollar goal was a big reach. Every time the odds came up, Kristy found a workaround. "We'll just sell more tickets." "We'll get a sponsor." "We'll convince Zach to go shirtless at the car wash. He's got abs for days."

Rhonda snorted. "You do that, and the entire town will show up. Just make sure you have extra towels."

Tanner shook his head, but inside, he was already plotting how to rope Zach in. He'd never admit it, but Kristy was infectious. She made impossible things sound possible.

At one point, Kristy and Rhonda left to make more coffee, leaving the two of them alone at the table. Tanner eyed the spreadsheets, then Emily.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked quietly.

She paused, scanning the paper in front of her. "I like fixing broken things. And Joe's invested in you. I respect Joe." She glanced up, gaze pinning him. "You're better at this than you think, you know."

He shook his head. “I’m just trying not to lose it all.”

Emily shrugged. “Sometimes that’s enough.”

The moment hung in the air until Kristy came back, two mugs in hand. She slid one to Emily, then perched on the counter herself, legs swinging. “You two talking about me?”

“Not this time,” Tanner told her with a smirk.

Rhonda joined them, and they worked past midnight, trading ideas, arguing over details, and building a plan from scratch. The whiteboard became a battleground of concepts and corrections, red arrows and green underlines, and a whole corner dedicated to “in case of total disaster.” At some point, the four of them stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the final draft.

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Tanner found himself looking at Kristy when she wasn't looking. Watching the way her energy never flagged, how she lifted everyone else's game, even Emily's. She'd changed the shop in ways he hadn't thought possible. She'd changed him, too, and he was just starting to admit it.

When they finally called it for the night, Kristy left behind a wreck of markers and sticky notes, but also a list of what came next. "Tomorrow, we set up the bake sale and start spreading the word about everything else. We call in favors from everyone we know to help with donations for the action and share details about the firefighter car wash. I'll take the school and the hospital. Tanner, you go to the mayor's office, and Rhonda you cover the stores on Main Street."

She hopped off the counter, stretching her arms over her head. "We're actually going to pull this off," she said, almost reverent.

Tanner glanced at the plan, then at her. "Yeah," he said, voice gruff. "I think we are."

He took one last look at the shop, the mess, the board, and the women who'd refused to let him sink. If tomorrow was the first step toward saving the Brave Badge, then he was going to be ready.

By the next day, the Brave Badge was ready for the bake sale. Long tables were crowned with a pyramid of sample pastries. The corkboard by the door was plastered with flyers for the car wash "Get hosed for a cause," the bake sale "Bigger than your grandma's, we promise," and of course, the auction and the dance.

Tanner finished setting the last of the baked goods on the table, stepping back to

survey the shop. It wasn't perfect, but it would work, and it was more alive than it had ever been under his watch.

Kristy was putting up the final decorations. She wore a crisp Brave Badge T-shirt, and her curls were barely tamed by a sparkly hair tie. She was humming something off-key, probably an old pop song, and bouncing on her toes every time she reached for a higher pin.

Emily had made herself a command post at the bar, laptop open, phone cradled to her ear. She was talking to Joe Griffin and updating him on the plan.

"We've got buy-in from the school, the SAR team, and the hospital," she rattled off, scrolling through a shared Google Sheet. "I'm sending you the projected numbers by midnight for the first event and buy-ins, but if the first weekend goes as planned, we're on track to hit your target."

There was a pause, and then Emily snorted. "No, I'm not giving them another discount. They already get free coffee if they show up in uniform." Another pause, then a quick look at Tanner and Kristy. "No, I don't think anyone's going to burn the place down. But if they do, at least we'll get the insurance."

She hung up, cracked her neck, and went right back to work. The woman was a machine. Tanner had to respect it, even if she scared him a little.

Rhonda finished her maintenance on Daisy and joined him, brushing her hands against the front of her jeans. "It's looking good, isn't it?" she asked, gesturing at the bake sale preparation.

"Like a five-alarm bake-off," Tanner smirked.

"I heard that," Kristy playfully admonished as she practically skipped over to them.

She grinned, then sobered. “You ready for tomorrow?”

He thought about it. About all the ways things could go wrong, about the humiliation of asking for help, about the risk of hoping for something better. He looked at Kristy, who waited, hands on her hips and chin lifted like she was daring him to say no.

“Yeah,” he said, surprised to find he meant it. “I’m ready.”

A few minutes later, Kristy was everywhere at once—greeting volunteers, arranging pastries that looked like they belonged in a gourmet magazine, and handing out free coffee samples to early birds.

The turnout was impressive. Half the town seemed to have shown up, eager to get their treats. They were selling the cupcakes and pastries faster than they could put them on the table. Everyone was excited and happy to be there, and Tanner thought this was a the perfect beginning to their two week run to turn things around for the coffee shop.

That was until Tanner spotted him—Mark, leaning against a street lamp across from the Brave Badge, sunglasses hiding his eyes but not the smirk on his lips. Tanner’s stomach tightened as he watched Mark push off from the post and stroll toward Kristy, who was laughing with a group of elderly ladies from the knitting club.

Tanner set his clipboard down and made his way over just in time to hear Mark say loudly enough for nearby heads to turn, “Kristy Howard. Never thought I’d see you slinging muffins in the streets.”

Kristy’s smile faltered ever so slightly as she turned to face him. “What are you doing here, Mark?”

Mark picked up a cupcake, inspecting it with exaggerated scrutiny. “Really went

down in the world since you left the hospital, huh?”

“Shows how little you know,” Kristy retorted with a frown.

Mark took a bite of the cupcake then grimaced theatrically. “Could’ve fooled me. What’s this supposed to be? Tastes like sweetened sawdust.”

A few of the customers frowned, whispering among themselves as they glanced over at her and Mark.

Tanner stepped forward. “I think you’ve said enough,” he interjected firmly.

Mark looked him up and down. “This has nothing to do with you, mister.”

“Actually it does, since I’m the owner of this shop,” Tanner corrected coldly.

“Well, ‘owner,’” Mark sneered, tossing the cupcake back onto the table where it scattered crumbs across several flyers. “Tell Kristy she should stick to nursing—she’s terrible at baking.”

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That was it. Tanner's patience snapped like an overstretched elastic band. He pointed to the exit and stated firmly, "I think you need to leave now."

Mark glared for several seconds before finally saying, "Fine," Mark spat out. "This place is doomed anyway."

He stalked off, throwing glares over his shoulder until he disappeared around a corner.

Tanner turned back to Kristy and the mess left behind; her face was pale but composed.

"I'm sorry about that," Kristy murmured as she began picking up the scattered pieces of pastry.

Tanner shook his head slightly as if clearing it. "It's not your fault he's...like that. Let's just focus on finishing the bake sale."

The rest of the bake sale went off without a hitch. When all was said and done, they cleared a thousand dollars. It wasn't a huge amount, but it was still a step in the right direction.

As they wiped down the last surfaces and locked up the cash drawer, Kristy's phone buzzed. She checked the screen and whooped loud enough to make Emily look up from her laptop.

"It's Nurse Gomez," Kristy said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "She got us

permission to do free samples in the hospital break room. I can drop off a coffee carafe and a whole tray of scones first thing tomorrow.”

Tanner raised an eyebrow. “You’re gonna to get that all done before tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll bake all night if I have to,” she declared, then shot him a thumbs-up. “This is huge. The nurses will push it to the docs, and the docs are the ones with cash. Trust me.”

He did. He wasn’t sure when that had happened, but he did.

Emily closed her laptop and slid off the barstool. “I’ll get in early, too. We’ll need to restock the Brave Blend and set up the donation jar while finalizing plans for the car wash.”

Rhonda laughed, then made a show of stretching her arms overhead. “That’s enough for tonight, right? Even heroes need sleep.”

“We sure do,” Tanner agreed. “Including you, Kristy, so that means you better rest and worry about baking in the morning.”

She seemed like she wanted to argue with him, but instead, she simply nodded. “I’ll rest a couple of hours, I promise.”

Emily left first, assuring them that she would have the updated date when she returned. Rhonda followed next while Kristy lingered, counting off the last tasks under her breath, checking and re-checking everything. When there was finally nothing left to do, she headed to the door, pausing in the entryway to look back.

“You locking up?” she inquired with a tilt of her head.

Tanner nodded. “I’ll do a last walk. Make sure no one breaks in to steal the carafe.”

She laughed, causing her nose to crinkle in the most adorable way. Tanner did his best to ignore how it made his heart race as he watched her leave.

After making his rounds, Tanner turned off the last light, pocketed the keys, and stepped outside. Maybe the Brave Badge wasn’t just a stopgap between careers or a charity case waiting for the ax. Maybe, with the right people, it could be a special place that bonded the town together. And maybe, just maybe, with Kristy beside him, it could be a refuge for both of them.

Chapter Nine

The car wash day arrived with a sky so clear and the sun so bright it felt like the whole universe was rooting for them. Early Saturday morning, firefighters rolled up in their shiny trucks, hoses ready and grins wide as they parked in the Brave Badge parking lot. The pavement transformed into a sudsy stage for local heroes scrubbing down every car that lined up.

The turnout was impressive. Half the town seemed to have shown up, eager to get their cars washed by firefighters or just to support the cause. Kids ran through the spray of water, dogs barked happily from their owners' cars, and local news cameras rolled, capturing every moment.

There were at least twenty cars in line—some official vehicles, but mostly battered pickups and family minivans. And all of them were getting the most inefficient, spectacular, and community-driven wash of their lives.

Kristy went back to inspecting the line with her clipboard, thanking the drivers as they handed over crumpled bills and loose change. “Thanks for supporting the Brave Badge,” she called, waving to a mom in a black SUV whose three sons were yelling

in the back seat.

The parking lot smelled like lemon cleaner, burnt espresso, and spring mud. Kristy liked how alive it felt—noisy, packed, every little moment vibrating with a new emergency to solve. The first responders, the retirees, the kids from the town’s soccer league—everyone was out today, drawn by the promise of free donuts and the vague threat of Rhonda’s super-secret surprise baked good, which, based on past trauma, Kristy suspected was just regular banana bread with a shot of rum.

She worked the crowd, placing new donation jars, chatting up the parents and old timers, and even making small talk with the brooding guy from the animal shelter who never smiled. “You got a dog in there, or just letting the cat hair accumulate?” she asked, pointing at the van. The guy blinked, then actually smiled, showing more teeth in one second than he had in the entire past month of morning drop-ins at the coffee shop.

Tanner hovered by the sidewalk, arms crossed over his blue Brave Badge shirt, looking like he was personally offended by how much water was being wasted. His sunglasses hid his eyes, but not his smirk—she saw him shake his head as a cluster of six-year-olds armed with tiny squeegees converged on a Jeep.

She liked that he was watching. She liked that he didn’t try to take over or micromanage the chaos. He just held the perimeter and let her run the show.

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Around noon, the line finally thinned, and Kristy caught a moment to breathe, wiping suds from her face and adjusting her wet blue T-shirt with “Car Wash for Bravery” written across it. She ducked into the shade, peeled the lid off her iced coffee, and took a giant, blissful gulp. The air was muggy, with spring threatening to turn into summer, and sweat had glued her hair to her forehead. Still, she was grinning like an idiot. They’d made nearly nine hundred bucks in the morning shift alone. If the rest of the day kept pace, they might actually earn enough to reach half their goal, which meant the auction and dance would help them cross the finish line.

"You think this will be enough?" Tanner asked as he joined Kristy.

"It will help us get there," she told him as she scanned the crowd. "Look at them all. This is community."

Kristy wiped suds off her face. "We've already raised nearly another grand toward the goal," she announced gleefully, waving a wet tally sheet. "And it's only noon."

"That's my girl," Tanner murmured, barely loud enough for her to hear.

Before she could respond, he sauntered off, leaving her to compliment what he meant by “my girl.” She wiped her brow with her sleeve and was about to go wrangle more volunteers when she heard a car engine—a low, predatory purr that didn’t belong to the town’s usual battered sedans. She glanced up.

A Tesla, black and shining, rolled up to the curb and stopped. The doors opened with a theatrical hiss. Out stepped Mark.

He wore sunglasses, but they weren't like Tanner's; they were too expensive, too shiny, the kind that screamed, "I have a stock portfolio, and I will explain it to you even if you never asked." His hair looked freshly cut. His white linen shirt—who even wore white linen in Clear Mountain?—was ironed. He was the only guy in the county who could look like a Miami drug lord at a small-town car wash.

Kristy felt her heart do a weird stutter. She reached for her coffee and immediately spilled half of it down her shirt.

Mark saw her. He didn't wave, just walked straight over, like he was late for a TED Talk. The crowd didn't part for him, so he had to maneuver between a trio of kids with sponges and got tagged with a stripe of blue soap across the knee. He scowled and looked for someone to blame.

"Wow," he said, reaching Kristy. "You're really going all in on the small-town fantasy."

She pretended to find a spot on her clipboard that needed urgent attention. "You came to support the fundraiser?" she asked, keeping her voice breezy.

He snorted. "I came to see if you were still alive. You haven't answered my texts."

"Probably because I changed phones," she snapped, which was technically true—she'd dropped her old one in a sink, then left it in a bag of rice until it went moldy.

Mark's smile was too wide, all canines. "I have to admit, I'm impressed. Last time I saw you, you were threatening to become a hermit. Now, you're running a bake sale, and a car wash out of a coffee shop. Quite the pivot."

She refused to look at him, hating the sarcasm that was dripping from his voice. She

looked at the line of cars instead, at the way the sun gleamed off the fire truck, at Tanner's still silhouette by the sidewalk, hoping that at any moment, he would see Mark bothering her and step in to intervene.

"I'm happy to help make this place work," she told him.

Mark leaned in. "Is that why you're wasting your nursing degree, or is there another reason?" He gestured with his head toward Tanner, making it clear who he was referring to.

It was meant to be a jab. It landed like a punch. Kristy felt her cheeks go hot. She tried to keep her expression flat, but she was sure her mouth had gone tight.

"Why do you care?" she shot back, low.

He shrugged, hands in his pockets, like he was the chilliest guy on earth. "I just thought you'd come to your senses by now. It's a waste, you know? All those years, all that debt. And for what? A town that can't keep a coffee shop open? You should go back to nursing; you should come back to me, where you belong."

A few of the parents in the crowd were watching now, sensing the tension. Kristy hated that she could feel their eyes. She wished she could teleport into the break room and hide behind the dry goods rack until Mark left.

She tried to laugh it off. "At least it's not corporate consulting."

That got a genuine smile out of him, but he was already on his next move. "You know, I could get you an interview at my company. We're always hiring people who can handle pressure. You'd fit right in. And you wouldn't have to deal with..." He gestured vaguely at the mayhem. "This."

She stared at him. The old Kristy—the one who wore navy scrubs and triple-timed down ER hallways—would have snapped. But the new one just felt tired.

“I’m good,” she insisted. “I like it here.”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he looked over her shoulder, at the crowd, at the slow-moving parade of cars, at the hand-painted banners, and the sunburnt kids. “You always were stubborn,” he said finally. “I just figured you’d get tired of playing pretend.”

There it was, loud and clear. Kristy’s throat closed up. She wasn’t going to cry in the parking lot. Not today.

She fixed her smile in place, just like she had a thousand times at the nurse’s station. “If you’re not here to get your car washed, I have to get back to work.”

He took a step back, but only just. “Maybe I’ll swing by in the next couple of days,” he said, voice sharp. “See if you and the shop are still here.”

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Kristy didn't dignify that with an answer. She spun away and marched toward the next car in line, which turned out to be the local sheriff's SUV.

But the words stuck in her chest, spreading out like a bruise.

She went through the motions, waving at kids, thanking donors, and shaking the cash jar with extra gusto. But it wasn't the same. She kept feeling the burn of Mark's gaze, even after he left like his words had stained her shirt worse than the spilled coffee.

She tried to reset. It didn't help. The next hour was a blur of wet shoes, sticky change, and shrieking toddlers. At one point, she tripped over a hose and splattered a bucket of soapy water across a regular customer, an older woman with purple hair who came in every Sunday for a single plain scone and hot tea. Kristy apologized a hundred times, but she was sure the story would make it into next week's town gossip.

She ducked inside the shop, hands shaking, and tried to wipe the sweat off her face. She was halfway to the break room when Tanner intercepted her.

"You okay?" he asked, voice low and—was that actual concern?

"Fine," she lied, already tugging at the sleeves of her T-shirt. "Just—" She gestured at the mess outside. "Car wash craziness."

He didn't buy it. She could tell from his expression. He didn't press, though. Instead, saying, "Well, you handled yourself good out there."

She snorted. "I just dumped a gallon of water on a grandmother."

“Adds character,” he said, and somehow, that made her feel better.

She wiped her face with a towel and felt her heartbeat start to slow. “Thanks, Tanner.”

He shrugged, and for a second, she saw the smile hiding there. She wasn’t sure what to do with the soft side of her boss that kept coming out around her. Deciding she needed to escape before she completely crumbled in front of him and everyonewatching, she told him, “I should go grab some supplies from the closet inside.”

Kristy tried to walk off her confused feelings, but the Brave Badge’s storage room was only three paces wide and smelled like melted plastic wrap and industrial-strength lemon cleaner. She wore a groove in the floor, back and forth between the mop bucket and the dry goods shelf. Outside, the fundraiser raged on. She could hear the DJ’s bad microphone, the distant whoops of kids fighting over water balloons, and—just once—the sound of Tanner’s voice, calm and steady, ordering someone to “knock it off before you break the glass.”

Inside, it was just the silence and her own heartbeat, pounding like she’d just pulled a double in the trauma bay. She thought about Mark, about his words, about the way he could still find the soft spots and poke them until she bled. But she also thought about Tanner, about the way he just stood there, unruffled, letting her fall apart without rushing to patch her up. For once, she didn’t want to be fixed. She just wanted to be, but she didn’t know how to do that.

Kristy could feel tears prick the corner of her eyes, and she tried to focus on the inventory—six gallons of oat milk, a case of espresso beans, and three unopened boxes of syrup pumps. Nothing required urgent attention.

The door creaked. Kristy whirled around, wiping her cheeks with the back of her

wrist just in time.

Tanner stood in the doorway. He didn't say anything. He just took in the scene—her red eyes, the way she'd braced herself on the edge of the dry goods shelf—and nodded once, like it all made sense.

She forced a laugh. "Didn't expect the boss to catch me mid-breakdown."

He closed the door behind him, quietly. "Didn't expect you to have one."

She snorted. "There's a lot about me you probably didn't expect. Like the fact that I can eat my own weight in lemon loaf when stressed."

He moved closer, but not so close that she felt crowded. Just enough to block out the window, the noise, the rest of the world.

"You want to talk about it?" His voice was softer than she'd ever heard it.

Kristy fiddled with the edge of her T-shirt. "Not really. But I probably should, so I don't end up crying into the espresso hopper later."

He waited, hands tucked into his pockets, patient as a mountain.

She started pacing again, slowly. "Mark's been showing up everywhere. He does this thing—whenever I try to move on, he suddenly remembers I exist. He says he's 'just checking in,' but it's more like he's checking up. Making sure I haven't found a way to live without him, I guess."

Tanner's jaw went tight. She noticed it but pretended not to.

"He thinks I'm having a crisis," she continued, her voice getting louder. "That I'm

going to wake up one day and realize this”—she waved at the storage room, at herself—“was all a huge mistake. He keeps telling me to go back to nursing, that I’m wasting my degree, my time, and my life. Like I’m too broken to know what’s best for me.”

She stopped, looking at Tanner for the first time since he entered. His face was granite. His eyes, though, were different—soft, maybe, or just less grumpy than usual.

She laughed again, but it came out weird and brittle. “I know it’s dumb. I shouldn’t care. But it’s like every time he shows up, he drags all my old mistakes out and makes me wear them.”

He didn’t jump in to fix it. He just stood there, letting her talk.

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“I just wish he’d leave me alone,” Kristy admitted, quieter now. “I wish he’d find a new hobby. Like pickleball, or collecting rare diseases.”

Tanner’s mouth twitched just barely. “I could make some calls. I know a guy who can get rare pathogens.”

That made her snort for real. “No murder-for-hire. Not yet.”

He nodded as if making a note.

She leaned against the wall, energy draining away. “I know I’m supposed to just ignore him. Or block his number. But it’s not that easy. He’s...like mold. You clean him out of the grout, and he shows up in the ceiling tiles.”

Tanner nodded again, and for a second, she wondered if he’d ever had someone like that—someone who kept finding their way back, no matter how much you tried to move on.

She didn’t want to cry in front of him. She didn’t want to seem weak. So she went for broke. “I need a boyfriend,” Kristy blurted.

The words hung in the air, suspended between them.

Tanner’s eyebrows shot up just a fraction. “A boyfriend?”

“Not a real one,” she added quickly. “A fake one. You know. So Mark will back off.”

She watched his face, waiting for him to laugh or say it was a stupid idea. Instead, he just blinked and then looked at the far wall like he was trying to solve a logic puzzle.

Kristy rushed on, “I know it’s dumb, but if Mark thinks I’ve moved on, maybe he’ll stop showing up. Stop trying to fix me, or whatever it is he’s doing. I’ll tell him I’m dating someone. If I’m convincing, he’ll lose interest and disappear.”

Tanner mulled it over, arms crossed tight. “You want me to be your fake boyfriend?”

She flushed, feeling the heat creep up her neck. “You’re the only one who’d be believable. I mean, you’re tall, you’re an ex-cop, you’re...you. He’d hate it. You’d be perfect.”

Tanner was silent for so long that Kristy started to backpedal. “You don’t have to. Seriously. I can just make up a guy. Say he’s a traveling magician or a hermit in the mountains?—”

“No,” Tanner interrupted. “You’re right; it has to be convincing if it’s going to work. If you want, I’ll do it.”

Now, she was the one who blinked. “You will?”

He nodded, simple as that. “If it gets him off your back, yeah. I’ll do it.”

Kristy stared at him, searching for sarcasm, but there was none—just a steady, unwavering offer.

She let out a long, shaky breath. “Thank you.”

He shrugged, but she saw the corners of his mouth twitch again like he was fighting back a smile. “Just let me know what the plan is. If you want me to punch him, I’ll

need advance notice, a good lawyer, and bail money.”

She laughed, a real one this time. “I don’t think any of that will be necessary. You can start by holding my hand in public. That’ll kill him faster than violence.”

Tanner looked at her hands, then back at her. “Noted.”

“We can start tomorrow. Today, we have a car wash to finish.”

She felt lighter. Not fixed, but at least patched up for now. Maybe this was a bad idea, but at least it wasn’t the worst one she’d had when it came to dealing with Mark.

The day ended with Kristy finding herself in the back, flicking off the lights and flipping the chairs. She moved on autopilot, hands still sticky from lemonade, brain still humming from everything that had happened. The fundraiser had blown past their goal, and she knew the town would be buzzing about it for days. Still, her brain replayed the run-in with Mark on an endless loop.

She tried not to think about it. Instead, she started a new loop: the thing she’d asked Tanner to do and the fact that he’d agreed without so much as a question.

She was halfway through wiping down the pastry case when Tanner appeared with two mugs in hand. He set one down for her and took a seat at the far end of the bar with his own.

“Rhonda’s gone home,” he told her. “No one left but us and the creaks of the floor.”

Kristy smirked, grabbing the mug and taking a seat across from him. “I think we can handle them.”

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They sat there, not talking, while the hum of the fridge filled the silence. It was the kind of silence Kristy usually hated, but this one felt almost okay.

“So,” Tanner said finally, “we should probably have a story.”

“A story?”

He nodded. “If you want this fake boyfriend thing to work, we have to get the details right. How long have we been dating? Where did we meet? Stuff like that.”

Kristy straightened, all business. “We met here. Obviously. You hired me, fell instantly in love with my quirky charm, and the rest is history.”

He grunted. “Could be worse.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, so we met here. How long have we been dating?”

Tanner considered. “A couple of weeks? A month?”

She thought about it. “A month. Long enough to be serious but not long enough for people to wonder why they haven’t seen us together.”

He nodded. And made a note on his phone. “Makes sense.”

She tried to peek, but he held it at a military-issue angle.

“We should know each other’s basic info,” Kristy said, reaching for a stack of

napkins and a Sharpie. “Favorite color?”

He looked at her, almost annoyed. “Blue. Yours?”

“Depends on the mood. But yellow, I guess. Or anything that doesn’t stain.”

He made a small smile at that, then went back to his phone.

“Pets?”

He shook his head. “Did as a kid. None now.”

“Same.” She scribbled down more notes, letting her curls fall in front of her face. It was easier to hide that way.

“What about hobbies?” he asked.

“Failing at rescuing coffee shops,” she deadpanned.

He snorted. “You’re not failing.”

She tilted her head to the side with a disbelieving smirk. “Is that so?”

He nodded. “You’re keeping the place alive.”

She let that sit, warm and strange, before moving on. “Okay. So, boundaries.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“For the act,” she clarified, cheeks burning. “Hand-holding, yes? Arm around the shoulders?”

He looked away, then back, like he was trying to read the fine print on a prescription bottle. “Whatever works. Just—don’t overdo it.”

She grinned, relieved. “No public makeouts. Got it.”

He drank his coffee, then said, “What if he doesn’t believe us?”

She looked up. “Then we’ll have to be convincing.”

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He didn't move. Didn't blink. But something in the air changed, just a little. Kristy felt her heart skip, then settle in again.

She tucked the napkin into her pocket. "I'll memorize all this before tomorrow. Thanks for going along with it."

He shrugged, but his posture softened. "You said it'd help."

She smiled. "You're a good boss."

He looked at her, deadpan. "I'm going to be an even better fake boyfriend."

That made her laugh, full and loud, and she realized she hadn't laughed like that since—well, a long time.

They finished their coffee in a companionable quiet. Kristy packed up the last of her notes, wiped down the bar one final time, and turned off the last overhead light. The shop shrank into itself, cozy and small, like it was holding its breath.

"Ready to go?" Tanner asked.

"Yeah," she nodded.

They walked out together into the cool night. The parking lot was empty, save for their cars and the ghost of the day's noise. Tanner didn't say anything, but he walked her to her car anyway, hands jammed in his pockets, eyes scanning the shadows like he was still on duty.

She slipped her keys into her door lock, then turned to face him. “Thanks, Blaze.”

He nodded once. “You’re welcome,” he told her softly, then walked away.

She watched him go, then got in her car. As she pulled out, she saw him pause at his own truck door, like he was checking to make sure she made it out okay.

She drove home with the window cracked, breathing in the summer night, and wondered how it was possible to feel so nervous and so hopeful at the same time. Maybe this was how second chances started.

Chapter Ten

Tanner wasn’t the type to get nervous about a dinner date, fake or otherwise. But for the entire afternoon, he’d done nothing but circle his living room, second-guessing the blue button-up he’d picked out. It was one of only two he owned that could pass for “nice,” both gifts from his sister at different Christmases. He considered, for the hundredth time, if the sleeves looked better rolled or down to the wrist. The mirror told him to quit fussing, but his gut said to try harder.

By the time he finally left his apartment, he’d changed his shirt twice and worn a permanent crease in the welcome mat. He drove his old Chevy into town, cracked the window, and let the cool evening air slap sense into him. This was supposed to be a play. An act. Something to get Kristy’s ex off her back, nothing more. But it had been a long time since Tanner had played at anything romantically, fake or not.

He pulled up outside Kristy’s place ten minutes early, waited exactly eight minutes, then texted her: Outside. No rush.

His heart hammered while he waited. He watched two kids chase a dog down the sidewalk, an old man in slippers check his mailbox three times in five minutes, and

the flicker of a porchlight across the street. He counted seconds and tried not to look desperate.

The door to Kristy's duplex opened. She stepped out, locking up behind her with one hand, holding a tiny purse in the other. Tanner didn't know a thing about women's dresses, but even he could tell this one was something special—pale yellow, scattered with tiny blue flowers. Her hair was down, curls tamed to something shiny and soft. He'd seen her every day for months now, but this version was new. He tried not to stare, failed, and then did it anyway.

He climbed out and met her at the curb. "You look nice," he said, and immediately wanted to punch himself for how basic it sounded.

She smiled, anyway. "So do you. The blue is...very on-brand."

He grunted. "A gift from my sister."

"She has good taste." She opened the passenger door and slid in, knees and ankles together in a way that made him feel like a lumbering bison.

He got behind the wheel. The air in the cab was thick with nerves. He fumbled for something to say, then just let the silence settle. That had always worked for him—quiet. Most people found it unnerving. Kristy just let it be.

"Do we need to go over our story again?" she asked after a few blocks, voice a little high.

Tanner thought about it. "You mean, like, first date details?"

"I mean, if we're selling this, we need to be on the same page. Are we the type who does long walks in the park, or the kind who takes and posts photos online?"

He hadn't even considered that. "Probably not the online one. I don't even have Instagram."

She grinned at him, quick and genuine. "Of course you don't. You probably still use a flip phone."

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He bristled. “It’s a burner. I get less spam.”

Kristy bit her lip, holding in a laugh. “You ever done this before?”

“Pretend to be someone’s boyfriend?” He snorted. “No. Not a big market for that in Clear Mountain.”

She went quiet for a moment. “Me neither. Just—if I do anything too weird, let me know?”

He risked a glance her way. She was staring straight ahead, eyes set and mouth tight. He wondered if the act was already wearing on her or if this was just pre-battle nerves. He’d seen it before, in the faces of rookies right before their first real call. Only this time, it wasn’t a domestic disturbance call, just an ex-boyfriend who refused to stay gone.

He merged onto the main road. Bella’s was only ten minutes away, but traffic was a mess—some parade had rerouted half the county through Main Street. Kristy drummed her fingers on her purse, then turned the conversation to safer ground. “So, what’s your favorite Italian dish?”

He squinted. “Probably lasagna.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. So classic.”

“You asked.”

She giggled, and the tension broke. “I’ll order for you so you can try something new. You look like you’d get overwhelmed by too many options.”

He made a face but let her have it. Truth was, he hadn’t eaten at Bella’s since his last police department Christmas party, which felt like another man’s life at this point.

They pulled up outside the restaurant. Even at five minutes to open, the lot was packed. Tanner found a spot at the edge, double-checked the locks, and met Kristy on her side before she could open her own door.

She arched an eyebrow. “Chivalry?”

“I told you I was going to be the best fake boyfriend ever,” he told her with a lopsided grin.

She gave a quick, approving nod. “Good start.”

They walked up to the front entrance, and he felt the first prick of nerves hit him again.

Bella’s wasn’t fancy, but it tried hard. White tablecloths, real candles in tiny glass holders. The walls were covered in old black-and-white photos of the original owner’s family, all of them looking like they’d rather be anywhere else than frozen in a frame above a bunch of strangers eating spaghetti. The lights inside were dim and gold, every window frosted with condensation and laughter. He hesitated at the door, but Kristy just went in, all business, her sundress trailing a lemon-bright wake behind her.

The hostess was a woman Tanner recognized—she’d once been married to a local SWAT member and now, worked as Bella’s unofficial gossip line. Perfect to carry word to Mark that Kristy was off the market. She gave them both a once-over, smile

widening. “Tanner Blaze. What a surprise to see you here, and with a date no less. Table for two?”

He nodded. “Somewhere intimate, please.”

“Of course, right this way.”

As they walked, Kristy leaned in close enough to whisper, “You’re supposed to put your hand on my back.”

He stopped. “What?”

She tilted her head, a signal for him to look. Sure enough, the couples at every other table had at least one hand resting on a back, a shoulder, a knee. He felt like a moron.

He waited until they turned the corner, then moved in closer and placed his hand on the small of Kristy’s back. Her hair smelled like something citrus, and he could feel the heat of her skin through the fabric.

She shot him a look, soft and half-mocking. “Natural, act natural.”

He kept his hand there as they reached their table, a little corner booth with a view of the street. It felt easy after that, not forced at all.

The hostess left them with menus and a bottle of sparkling water. Kristy waited until she was gone, then grinned at him. “See? Not so hard.”

He grunted but didn’t argue. He opened his menu to distract himself, though if he had his way, he would stick with the lasagna.

Their waiter appeared all smiles and hair gel, and took their orders. Kristy ordered

them a bottle of red wine. They kept it light. When the waiter left, Kristy leaned over the table, voice dropping. “I think we’re supposed to look into each other’s eyes.”

He rolled his. “You’re making this worse.”

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She snickered. “You’re not so bad at this, you know.”

“You’re wrong. I’m horrible,” he admitted quietly.

Kristy shrugged. “That’s not true. Besides, you just have to be better than Mark.”

Tanner had no idea what to say to that. He’d seen guys like Mark—could spot them a mile off. Didn’t matter if they wore a badge, a suit, or a fancy pullover. They all shared the same way of talking over you like you were a speed bump in their perfect day. He wanted to tell her she was better than that, but he figured she already knew. Maybe just needed reminding.

He shook his head and tried to focus on the menu, but her face lingered in his vision even after he looked away. He wondered how many people in the restaurant had already clocked them as a couple. He wondered if he wanted them to.

Their bottle of wine arrived. Kristy poured them both a glass, then held hers up for a toast. “To fooling the world.”

He tapped his glass against hers, careful not to spill. “To not getting caught.”

She laughed, then sipped, and the next few minutes passed in a haze of half-truths and improv. They recounted stories from the shop, made up inside jokes, and pretended at memories. He realized it was easier than he’d expected. Maybe because he’d always been better at pretending nothing was wrong than talking about what was.

Eventually, Kristy set her wine down and glanced at him. “How are you so calm?”

He thought about it. “Spent a lot of years waiting in silence for things to get worse.”

She looked at him, something new in her eyes. “Doesn’t have to be like that, you know.”

He didn’t answer, but he let himself believe it for half a second.

Kristy finally broke the ice. “Do you think anyone here believes us?”

He looked around. “The hostess does. She already texted three people.”

She grinned. “You think she’s running a book on whether we’ll make it?”

“She’d make more if she did.”

Kristy sipped her wine, then set the glass down. “How did you end up in Clear Mountain?”

He hadn’t expected her to ask. Most people already knew his story or pretended they didn’t. “Grew up here. Family left after my dad died, but I stayed. Got on the force, never looked back.”

She nodded, like she understood. “You wanted to stay close to what you knew.”

“Yeah. Didn’t have much use for new places.”

She twisted her napkin again. “Do you miss it? Being a cop?”

He thought about lying, then decided he owed her more. “Every day. But that part of

my life's over.”

She didn't push. Just nodded again, soft and slow.

He watched her for a second. “You ever think about going back to nursing?”

Kristy's smile faded. “Sometimes. I loved saving people. But after a while, the losses outweighed the wins, and I couldn't take it anymore.”

He didn't get it. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged, but it was too big a gesture for someone trying to play it cool. “It got to be...too much. The grief. The hours. The way you go home and can't sleep because your head's still on the ones you couldn't save.”

He knew the feeling. “Yeah, I get that.”

She looked at him, and something passed between them—an understanding, maybe, or just the relief of not having to explain the hard stuff.

“So, real question,” she said, voice low. “What was the worst date you've ever been on?”

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Tanner almost laughed. “You mean besides this one?”

She grinned. “That’s cheating. This isn’t even a real date.”

He leaned back. “Had a girl throw a drink at me once. Tequila. Burned like nobody’s business.”

“Wow,” she raised her eyebrows in shock. “What’d you do?”

He shrugged. “Told her I didn’t want to meet her kids on the first date.”

Kristy covered her mouth, trying not to laugh. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“Your turn.”

She thought for a minute. “Got set up with a guy who showed up in a tuxedo...for Applebee’s.”

He raised a brow. “He was just trying to impress you.”

“I tried to overlook it, but he spent the entire time talking about his budget. Tried to get me to sign up for a rewards card before the check came.”

He shook his head. “You have terrible luck.”

She shrugged, but her eyes were dancing. “It’s why I think I’m destined to be alone.”

He looked at her, really looked, and saw the way she was half-joking, half-hoping he'd disagree.

“I don't think that's true. You're too great a person for that to happen.”

Their food arrived—lasagna for him, fettuccine for her. He was about to dig in when he caught the look on her face.

“What?”

She gestured to his fork. “You're supposed to feed me a bite. For the cameras.”

He raised his brow. “You're making this up.”

She opened her mouth wide as a dare.

He speared a forkful and offered it. She leaned in, took it with a flourish, and chewed.

“Good,” she murmured, swallowing. “Now, your turn.”

She twisted her fork with expert skill and held it out. He leaned forward, careful not to look like a toddler, and took the bite. Sauce dripped down his chin, and he wiped it away fast.

She was laughing at him, but he didn't mind. Not even a little.

It went like that for the rest of the meal—silly, light, easy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten with someone and not kept one eye on the exit.

The waiter brought dessert—tiramisu because Kristy insisted it was non-negotiable. She scraped the plate clean, then licked her fork, unashamed. Tanner laughed, for

real, this time.

“Never seen anyone go at dessert like that,” he told her.

She grinned. “Life’s too short for dignity.”

Kristy talked about her old job, the stories that had stuck with her—kids who made it, old women who didn’t, and the way every night felt like a coin flip between hope and disaster. Tanner listened the way he used to when taking reports or coldcalls. She had a way of making even the sad stuff sound like it mattered.

He found himself wanting to tell her things he hadn’t told anyone. How he hated being watched now, hated the way people looked at him like he was a reminder of something that could happen to anyone, any day.

He wanted to tell her more secrets, but then Kristy went still, her eyes locked on the door.

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Tanner followed her gaze. Mark, with too much gel in his hair and an expensive suit. A date on his arm—long brown hair, bored expression, a flashy dress.

The guy scanned the room, spotted them, and zeroed in like a missile.

Kristy's grip on Tanner's hand went white-knuckle. Tanner's pulse picked up, but he kept his face flat. He straightened in his chair and kept his hand wrapped tight around hers.

“Well, well,” Mark said, drawing out the words like a bad actor. “Didn't expect to see you here, Kristy, on a date...with him.”

Kristy didn't let go of Tanner's hand when she finally spoke. “We were just finishing up. You can have the place all to yourself.”

Tanner looked up and met the other man's eyes. “Need something?”

Mark smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. “No, I'm good. Though I have to admit, it's not really professional to mix business with pleasure. You're just looking for a lawsuit, aren't you, buddy.”

“Tanner Blaze,” he corrected with a glare. “And our relationship is none of your business. Why don't you focus on your own date.”

“Yeah, baby, I don't know why you decided to bring me to this dump at the last minute. You texted me earlier today youwere taking me into the city.” She gestured up and down at her dress. “My outfit is wasted around here.”

Mark ignored his date's complaining and looked at Tanner. "Hope you know what you're getting into, pal. Kristy's a lot to handle."

Tanner smiled, slow and sure. "Yeah. That's the point."

Mark's smirk faded. "Well, good luck with that. If you need any pointers, let me know."

"I don't need any advice from you," Tanner stated firmly.

After a few seconds, Mark drifted back to the bar and pulled out his phone. His date followed behind with a pout on her face.

Tanner let out a breath. "You all right?"

Kristy nodded, but her jaw was tight.

He brushed her knuckles with his thumb. "You want to leave?"

She looked at him, really looked, and nodded.

The check came. He grabbed it before Kristy could see, pulled out his card, and handed it over without looking at the total.

"Chivalry again?" she teased.

He shrugged. "Got to keep up appearances, don't I?"

They got up and left the last of the tiramisu behind. As they walked out, Tanner kept his hand on her back, not for show, but because he wanted to. He didn't let go until they reached his truck.

She let out a sigh. “I hate that he does that. Acts like he’s still entitled to a piece of my life.”

Tanner shook his head. “He’s not.”

She looked at him, eyes shining. “Thanks for not letting him get to you.”

He grunted. “He’s not worth it.”

She smiled, small but real. “You did good, Blaze. Oscar-worthy.”

She got in first, pulling her skirt smooth. He started the engine, then just sat for a second, not sure how to say what he was thinking.

She solved it for him. “You did good, Blaze. I almost believed it myself.”

He found comfort in that. He admired her far more than was sensible or advisable, and the depth of his feelings surprised him.

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He drove her home. The night was soft and empty, every light in the town glowing. He pulled up at her place and watched her unlock the door.

She turned and halfway inside. “Thanks for tonight.”

He nodded but didn’t move to leave.

She leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, waiting for him to say something else.

He tried. The words got stuck. In the end, he just said, “See you tomorrow morning, Kristy.”

She smiled, something quiet and real. “See you then, Tanner.”

She closed the door, and he sat in the truck for a long time, engine idling. He hadn’t expected to want a second date. But now, he wasn’t sure he’d survive not getting one.

Chapter Eleven

Kristy arrived at the Brave Badge before sunrise, her eyes gummy with sleep and her hair in a bun so lopsided it looked like an art installation. She stopped cold, mid-step, as the light fixtures blinked on. Someone had rearranged the entire shop.

The counter and the bar, to be fair, were where they always were—Daisy perched on top, gleaming like a diva, register across from her. But the rest? Kristy’s jaw dropped.

The old, hard-backed chairs and laminate tables had been pulled into groupings instead of the neat, school-cafeteria rows. The pastry counter was moved closer to the door like Emily suggested. The biggest change was in the far corner: a reading nook, complete with a worn-in armchair upholstered in navy and gold, a squat wooden bookshelf crammed with battered paperbacks, and three soft blanket throws draped over the chair arms like a hug waiting to happen. A standing lamp with a stained glass shade casts a honey-yellow glow over the whole area.

The main floor was broken up with side tables for chess or cards, all topped with succulents in mismatched mugs. The harsh, flickering ceiling bulbs were gone—replaced with warm-toned track lights that turned every surface into something you wanted to touch.

Kristy's first instinct was to hunt for a camera—this was a prank, had to be—but it was too real, too carefully done. She spun in a slow circle, mouth open, backpack slipping off one shoulder.

Behind her, a door creaked. Kristy turned.

Tanner stood at the end of the hallway, holding a mug of coffee and wearing the rarest of rare creatures: a new shirt. Not flannel, not faded. Charcoal, sleeves rolled. He watched her for a beat, his jaw moving like he was working out a calculus problem he hated.

“You did this?” she asked, pointing everywhere at once.

He shrugged, looking down into his mug. “Emily said we needed to make the space more inviting for...future stuff.”

Kristy floated across the room, running her hand over the arm of the reading chair. “You found this at the thrift store?”

“Rhonda’s cousin donated it,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “She said her cats only puked on it twice.”

“Smells like lemon Pledge,” Kristy reported, burying her nose in the blanket. “And the bookshelves and paperbacks?”

“Rhonda said people kept asking if we had a reading area.” He shrugged, more sheepish than grumpy. “Again, all of it was donated, so I figured, why not.”

“It’s perfect.” She scanned the room again, taking it in as if it were a scene from a movie she was pretty sure she’d want to watch over and over. “I love the lights, too. You did all this in one night?”

He didn’t answer, but the way his cheeks colored told her yes.

She looked at him, really looked, and saw the effort it had cost him—not just the sweat and time, but the surrender of his old order. The sacred layout, the routines. The badge of pride he’d worn since the place opened.

She crossed the room, stopped a couple feet in front of him, and smiled. “I’m proud of you,” she told him, meaning every word.

Tanner gave a noncommittal grunt, but he met her eyes. “It’s just furniture and a few decorations.”

“It’s more than that.” She grinned wider. “It’s like, actual human progress. It’s a good look on you, Blaze.”

He huffed, but she caught the ghost of a smile before he buried it behind his mug.

She noticed the wide selection of books and was about to ask him if he planned to

join Oprah's Book Club when she heard the front door open. Kristy's heart stuttered in her chest as she half expected Mark to saunter in, but no—this was a different kind of tornado.

Joe Griffin, founder of Brave Badge Roasting Company, entered wearing his signature Stetson hat and a duster jacket that belonged in a cattle drive. He looked bigger in person than he did in the company photos—broader, more solid. His face was lined with both sun and smiles. Beside him, all edges and kinetic energy, was Emily Merlot, today in a leather jacket and boots that looked more expensive than Kristy's entire wardrobe.

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“Is this the famous Clear Mountain outpost?” Joe bellowed, scanning the room. “Looks better than the pictures. Hey, kiddo.” He winked at Kristy, who grinned in spite of herself.

Emily was already circling, tablet in hand, laser-focusing on every detail. She made notes, snapped pictures, and muttered to herself as she paced out the new floor plan.

“Morning, Joe,” Tanner greeted.

Joe shook his hand, then Kristy’s, with a grip that could juice an orange. “You the reason this place still has a pulse?” he asked Kristy.

She blushed. “I just keep the coffee flowing.”

“That’s what keeps the world going,” Joe corrected.

Emily finished her inspection and then turned to Kristy and Tanner. “This is excellent,” she told him, voice clipped but almost complimentary. “You implemented all of the suggestions. The reading corner is especially strong.”

She clicked a pen, marking something on her list. “We’ll want to adjust a little. These tables should angle toward the counter for faster service. And the new lighting gives the space a premium feel. Well done.”

Kristy caught Tanner’s subtle flinch at the word “premium,” but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he just sipped his coffee, eyes set on the door like he was prepping for a tactical breach.

Joe ambled around, tipping his hat to the space and looking at the Hero Wall. He traced his fingers over the frames, then glanced at Tanner. “You’ve done good by your people. Don’t forget that, no matter what the numbers say.”

Tanner didn’t answer, but his chin lifted a degree.

Emily pointed her pen at Kristy. “You’re running point on the auction and dance tomorrow?”

Kristy nodded, suddenly nervous under the intense scrutiny.

“Good,” Emily nodded. “The schedule’s tight. If you need support, grab me. Otherwise, make sure the transition from auction to dance is seamless. We want everyone to walk out of the event with a reason to visit the Brave Badge after.”

Joe interrupted with a laugh. “Let the girl breathe, Emily. She’s got this.”

Emily actually paused. “Sorry,” she murmured, not really sounding sorry. “I get intense.”

“That’s why I hired you,” Joe told her with a pat on the back. “You’re the perfect bulldog. Once you get a hold of something, you don’t let go.”

The door opened again as Rhonda entered, hair spiked in all different directions and arms full of bakery boxes. Within minutes, the shop was bustling with activity—Rhonda and Kristy prepping trays, Emily checking every logistical box twice, and Joe sharing war stories with Tanner by the coffee bar. Kristy felt the nervous energy buzzing in her fingers, but underneath it was something new—a sense of belonging, of being part of a team that might just pull off the impossible.

As the sun crept higher and the first regulars drifted in, Kristy took her position

behind the counter. She felt Tanner watching her from across the room, and when she looked over, he didn't look away. He just nodded, almost imperceptible, and she smiled.

The day sped by fast, Kristy taking any dips in customer traffic to make last-minute calls for the fundraiser. By the time they were closing up the shop, she was certain they would be ready.

Joe clapped his hands and called out, "All right, troops. Let's go see what you put together for the big event. We've got a barn to string up, a dance floor to prep, and a crowd to wow."

Kristy looked at Tanner, excitement fizzing in her chest. "You ready for this?"

He grunted. "I'll survive."

Joe took the lead with Tanner by his side, surveying the street as if he'd single-handedly tamed the entire town. Emily was lost in her phone, thumbs moving at a speed that would have impressed a teenage girl. She didn't look up as she walked, only pausing to snap a photo of the shop's new window decal. Kristy trailed after with Rhonda, content to bring up the rear as they climbed into Joe's black SUV.

Even from a half mile away, she could see the rental trucks parked out front of the barn at the edge of town. Volunteers moved in and out, and someone was already putting together a photo-op area at the entrance. Inside, an army of moms from the PTA was arguing about tablecloth color, while a knot of highschool kids balanced on a ladder stringing LED lights from the rafters.

Kristy's brain instantly shifted into ER triage mode. She weaved through the chaos, clipboard in hand, a force of nature in her yellow jacket and scuffed sneakers. "You, careful with those cords—last thing we need is an electrical fire," she called. "Can

someone check the outhouses? Make sure there's toilet paper and not, you know, raccoons?" She spun around and found the first mom in her line of sight. "Where's the auction stuff? Is all of it ready, or do we need to prep it?"

The woman blinked, then pointed toward the back. "There's a whole table of baskets ready to go—some of them are still shrink-wrapped, though."

"I'll find someone to handle it," Kristy promised, already moving on.

She found the coffee and dessert table in the far corner, Rhonda and two helpers unloading box after box of supplies. "That's a lot of Brave Badge Blend," Kristy said, peering at the sheer mass of coffee beans.

Rhonda beamed. "If people don't buy it, I'll drink it all myself and go down happy."

Kristy grinned. “I’ll join you.”

She turned around just in time to catch Tanner muscling a stack of folding tables. He was in his element: sleeves rolled, sweat already darkening his shirt at the chest, muscles flexed, and face set in a look that was more focused than grumpy. He moved through the barn with the confidence of someone who’d spent a lifetime in close quarters with disaster and came out the other side still standing.

Their eyes met, and Kristy gave him a thumbs-up. He smirked and kept going, but she noticed the way his gaze lingered like he was taking mental notes on her every move.

The hours blurred. Kristy set up auction baskets and silent-bid sheets and fixed a tangle of extension cords that would’ve made OSHA weep. She gave pep talks to volunteers and mediated three near-fights between different groups. She loved the chaos, the purpose, the feeling of every little victory stacking up to make a difference.

Every so often, she’d glimpse Tanner moving in the background—hauling, fixing, assembling. He never asked questions, never complained. Sometimes, when he thought she wasn’t looking, he’d watch her, that same half-smile on his lips, like he was amazed she hadn’t combusted yet.

By late afternoon, the barn was transformed. The raw wooden beams were wrapped in strings of LED lights, casting a warm glow on the vases on each table waiting for the wildflowers arriving tomorrow afternoon. The auction table held enough baskets to supply a small nation with self-care kits and local hot sauces, and the stage was set and ready for the band.

When 7:00 p.m. rolled around, the last folding chair was in place, and the floors swept, she dismissed the last of the volunteers—urging them to head home for a late dinner. And Kristy found herself alone for the first time all day. She looked around, catching her breath, feeling that familiar drop in her stomach that always came after the adrenaline wore off.

Then she saw Tanner standing by the makeshift stage, arms crossed and gaze fixed on her. He looked tired but less closed off than usual. The lines on his face had softened.

She made her way over, letting her hands slide into her back pockets. “I think this is going to put us over the top,” she told him, voice echoing off the beams.

“I hope so.”

They stood in the hush of the barn, LED lights flickering above them. Kristy felt suddenly shy, unsure where to put her feet or her words.

Tanner cleared his throat. “You seem at home doing this.”

“What? Herding cats and fixing chaos?” She teased. “I guess. Not much different than when I worked in the ER on a Saturday night.”

He leaned against a table, arms loose at his sides. “It’s got to be hard letting it go.”

She hesitated, staring up at the rafters. “Sometimes. But I got tired of trying to fix things you couldn’t fix.” She stopped, suddenly unsure if she wanted to keep going. But she did. “It wore me down. Like every patient I lost was a brick in my backpack, and eventually, I just couldn’t carry it anymore.”

Tanner nodded, not looking away. “I get it. I felt the same after my accident. Like someone yanked my badge and then handed me a new life with none of the

instructions.”

Kristy blinked, surprised by the honesty. “That’s got to be tough.”

“Letting go was, but then I think about how much of my old life was just being angry at things I couldn’t change. Now, at least, I can focus on what I can do.” He caught her gaze and held it. “Like making sure you don’t lose your mind trying to run this circus.”

She laughed, a real laugh, and the tension broke. “Circuses are my specialty.”

Kristy sat down on a hay bale, patting the spot next to her. Tanner joined her, the two of them framed in the glow of the lights and the smell of hay and coffee.

She looked at him, the way his shoulders still hunched even when he was supposed to be at ease, the way his hands flexed on his knees, restless. She wanted to say something but didn’t know how. She picked at a stray piece of straw, thinking. “I’ve never told anyone this, but it broke me a little every time I failed at saving someone.” She swallowed, feeling the words scrape her throat. “I thought if I got out, I’d stop feeling that way. But it doesn’t go away.”

Tanner nodded slowly. “Maybe you’re not supposed to stop feeling it.”

She looked at him. “You think?”

He shrugged, but there was a weight to it. “I think people like us don’t get to turn it off. But maybe we can share the load. Make it a little lighter.”

The words sat between them, soft and steady.

Kristy felt her chest go tight, but not in a bad way more like a balloon filling up and

threatening to float away if she didn't tether it down.

She nudged his shoulder, their arms pressed together. "You're a lot more philosophical than you look."

He smirked. "Don't tell anyone. It'll ruin my image."

She smiled, and suddenly, everything felt warm and safe. The barn, the lights, even the creaks in the wood siding.

They sat together, saying nothing for a long while. Kristy listened to the sound of their breathing, the way his matched hers, steady and grounding.

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She looked over and found him watching her, eyes softer than she'd ever seen them.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded.

“Do you ever get scared that this”—she waved at the barn, the world, herself—“isn't enough? That it's just a pause, and eventually the pain catches up again?”

He considered it, then admitted, “Every day. But today was good. And maybe tomorrow will be, too.”

Their faces were inches apart now, close enough that she could see the flecks of green in his eyes, the nick in his eyebrow from an old scar, the scar along his jawline.

She felt the urge to lean in, to close the gap. She saw the same urge flicker across his face. He reached up, almost unconsciously, and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, his hand lingering for a heartbeat longer than it needed to.

The space between them was electric, charged and dangerous. She felt her breath catch, felt the world tip on its axis.

He leaned in, just a fraction, and she felt his breath, warm and sweet with a hint of lemon loaf. She tilted toward him, her heart hammering.

And then the barn doors slammed open, flooding the space with noise and cold air—Aiden and Zach, arms full of boxes.

Kristy jerked back, almost toppling off the hay bale. Tanner straightened, his face going red as he stood up too fast.

“Sorry,” Aiden called, oblivious.

“Did we interrupt something?” Zach questioned, a little bit better at picking up on the tension in the barn.

Kristy scrambled to her feet, busying herself with the nearest extension cord, her cheeks on fire. “No, you’re right on time. Let’s get the last of the auction items set up.”

She kept her head down, feeling Tanner’s gaze on her, equal parts regret and amusement. He moved to help his friends, hauling boxes like he was grateful for the distraction.

Kristy kept herself busy, but she stole glances at Tanner whenever she could, finding him always already watching her, the memory of their almost kiss lingering between them like a promise.

Chapter Twelve

The barn looked nothing like the place where he’d hauled hay as a high school kid. It was transformed—every rafter was wrapped in strings of LED white lights, casting soft, golden lines on the floor. The tables had tablecloths—actual tablecloths—and elegant white vases crammed with wildflowers. Even the folding chairs looked better, grouped into little islands around the tables.

Tanner drifted through the crowd, shoulders squared and jaw set, but inside, every step was a jolt. He didn’t recognize half the people in attendance, but that meant the outreach had worked. Or maybe Rhonda’s advertising blitz had blanketed the entire

county. Whatever it was, the barn was packed wall-to-wall with every flavor of Clear Mountain resident: ranchers in boots, retirees in puffy jackets, a couple of the “remote worker” types in clean jeans and flannels, and a handful of teenage volunteers roving with trays of cheese cubes and mini cookies.

He caught sight of Kristy at the center of it all, clipboard in hand, her blonde hair down and catching the light like something out of a shampoo commercial. She was running the event, but not in the frantic, barely-holding-it-together way he’d seen at the shop. Here, she was in her element—smiling, pointing, making jokes loud enough to cut through the roar of the crowd. She’d slip through the throng, coaxing people to bid on auction items, getting them to laugh, nudging them into going just a few bucks higher.

Tanner let himself watch for a long minute, arms crossed over his chest. Every so often, she’d glance up from her clipboard and scan the barn, maybe for trouble or maybe for him. When their eyes met, she’d grin and shake her head like she was surprised he hadn’t bailed yet.

The band started up—a country cover of something he barely recognized, but it got the tables humming and the attendees up and looking at the auction items. On the wall near the entry, Emily had set up a giant thermometer board to track the fundraising total. It was already a third of the way up, thanks to a bidding war over a weekend at one of the new Air BnBs and a “Chief for a Day” police ride-along that Zach, predictably, had offered to personally supervise.

Tanner did a loop, said hello to Joe and Emily, who were working a different section of the room, followed by several of his former colleagues from the police department as well as the fire department, and then doubled back to the edge of the dance floor. He was just close enough to hear Kristy’s voice as she ran a drawing for “biggest caffeine addict in town.” The prize: a year’s worth of Brave Badge brew. The winner was a high school senior who looked like he’d already maxed out his heart rate for

the week. The kid's table erupted into cheers as he took a bow, nearly spilling his lemonade on the town council president.

It was chaos, but the good kind. The kind where nobody cared if your shoes were dirty, where strangers clapped you on the back and called you by your first name even if they'd never met you. He felt it, down in his bones, and it was a different kind of alive than he'd been in years.

The auction crept closer to the target. Every time the thermometer inched higher, Kristy's excitement was contagious—she'd whoop, clap, high-five whoever was standing closest. Even Rhonda, who was usually allergic to public displays of enthusiasm, was beaming as she brought out trays of lemon loaf and Brave Badge cupcakes.

A little while later, the band slowed things down. It was one of those old-school, country heartbreak ballads—something about stars and second chances. Some of the guests wolfed down dessert and refilled coffee cups, and for the first time all night, there was space on the dance floor.

Tanner hated dances, had always hated them. He was the guy who guarded the punchbowl, the wallflower in a room full of peacocks. But something about the way Kristy was looking at the couples shuffling through the slow song—hopeful, wistful, almost sad—made his feet move before he'd had time to think.

He crossed the room in six long strides, dodged a toddler and a tipsy old man, and stopped right next to her. She smelled like citrus and Sharpie ink.

“Hey,” he said because he never needed more than that.

She looked up, startled. “Hey.”

“Want to dance?”

He didn’t give her a chance to say no. He just offered his hand, bracing himself for a joke or a gentle brush-off. But she set the clipboard on the chair behind her, squared her shoulders, and took it. Her palm was warm, her fingers small and strong.

He led her out onto the floor, which was really just a patch of barn wood swept clear of folding chairs and dust. The song drifted over them, syrupy and slow, and they moved in a lazy circle. Kristy’s free hand landed on his shoulder, light at first, then settling there like it belonged.

She was a better dancer than him, but she let him set the pace, only occasionally nudging him back on beat. He felt the eyes on them—Aiden and Lindsay at a table, Zach and Erica near the food, and even a few of the teenage helpers. He didn’t care. It was the most normal he’d felt in two years, maybe longer.

Kristy was looking anywhere but his face at first. At the ceiling lights, at the wildflowers on the tables, and at the chart with the rising red marker line. But after a minute, she looked up at him, really up, and whispered, “Thank you for this.”

He wanted to play it cool, to say it was nothing, but the words stuck. So he squeezed her hand a little tighter and murmured, “It’s my pleasure.”

Another couple joined them, then two more. By the end of the song, a dozen people were swaying to the music, and the band shifted to something a little faster, but Kristy didn’t let go.

She leaned in, voice barely above the music. “If we get to thirty-five hundred, Emily said she’ll make Joe do the two-step onstage.”

Tanner snorted. “That’s worth a donation all by itself.”

She laughed, and the sound vibrated through his chest, spreading warmth everywhere it touched. He didn’t want to let go. The lights, the noise, the feeling of being part of something again—it was better than he remembered.

The song wound down, and they paused, still holding hands. He looked down and noticed the freckles on her nose, the way her lips parted just slightly like she was about to say something. He leaned in, closer than he had any right to, and watched her eyes flicker to his mouth. He was about to kiss her. He was really about to do it, and for once, he didn’t care who saw.

But the spell broke all at once. The barn doors clattered open, letting in a gust of cold air—and a familiar voice, sharp and ugly, rang out over the music.

“What a joke,” Mark snarled, standing in the doorway with a half-empty whiskey bottle in hand. His shirt was untucked, his face red. He looked like he was looking for a fight, and he was walking right toward them.

Kristy’s whole body tensed, including her hand in Tanner’s. He pulled her closer, wanting to protect her from whatever came next.

Mark’s eyes flicked from Kristy to Tanner and back again like he was calculating the odds in some twisted game. He stopped just short of the dance floor and wagged the bottle in their direction. “Guess it’s true what they say—some people really do end up settling for less.”

The music faltered; the whole barn seemed to go quiet at once. A few heads turned.

Someone near the stage muttered, “Oh no,” under their breath.

Tanner let go of Kristy’s hand, stepped in front of her, and squared up. His voice was low and even. “You should leave, Mark.”

The other man grinned ominously, teeth bared. “Or what? You gonna arrest me? Oh, wait. You can’t. Not anymore.”

He was drunk, but his words were sharp enough to cut. Tanner could feel every muscle in his body go taut, but he kept his hands at his sides.

Kristy stepped up next to him, voice calm but tight. “Mark, go home. You’re not welcome here.”

Mark sneered. “Not what I heard. Isn’t this shindig supposed to be for everyone in the community? Last time I checked, that included me.”

“Invited members of the community,” Tanner emphasized the first word. “Kristy’s right, you need to leave...now.”

Tanner could see the embarrassment flicker across Kristy’s face. He wanted to hit the other guy or at least drag him outside by the collar, but that wasn’t going to help. Instead, he planted his feet and stared Mark down.

Aiden and Zach were already on the move, skirting the edge of the crowd. If Mark tried anything, they’d have his arms pinned in two seconds flat.

“So that’s it, huh?” Mark shouted. “You went from saving lives to...what? Begging for spare change with this ex-cop loser?” His finger jabbed at Tanner, missing by a mile.

People stopped pretending not to watch. Conversations hiccupped and died. Even the band couldn't play past it. Someone at the food table snorted, but it was the only laugh in the place.

Mark was winding up for another volley when he tripped over a bundle of extension cords. He barely caught himself on the auction table, knocking a row of shrink-wrapped baskets to the floor. Cellophane burst. Wine bottles rolled. Someone shrieked as a shower of gourmet popcorn hit their shoes.

"Oops," Mark gurgled, smiling with all his teeth. "Guess that's coming out of your tip jar, Kristy."

He tried to right himself, failed, and then turned to the nearest group of guests. "You all know, right? This—" He waved his arms, nearly clocking an old man in a ball cap. "—this is just a scam. There's no way she's dating him. It's all for the cameras. You think a guy like that could land a looker like her? Get real."

A cluster of high schoolers filmed it on their phones. Rhonda, hands full of coffee carafes, looked ready to brain him with the first thing she could grab. At the edge of the barn, a few couples started gathering their coats, eyes wide, ready to bolt.

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Tanner stepped forward just enough to block Mark's line of sight. "That's enough," he growled, voice low. "You're embarrassing yourself. Go home."

But Mark had found his audience. He sidestepped around Tanner, zeroing in on Kristy now. "You're not even trying to hide it, are you? I mean, pretending to date a cop? Is that supposed to make your mom proud, or are you just desperate to get a rise out of me?"

Kristy's hands shook, but she didn't back down. "Please leave, Mark. You're drunk. Go home."

He mimicked her, voice falsetto. "Please leave, Mark. You're drunk. Go home." Then he laughed—hard, ugly, and mean. "You're even more fun when you're playing pretend. How long do you think this'll last? Until you get bored and leave him like you left me?"

Tanner could feel every eye on them now. He had to end it, fast, before the whole fundraiser dissolved into disaster.

But Mark wasn't finished. He stalked past the auction table, grabbing at one of the flyers advertising the "Brave the Bean" campaign. He crumpled it in his fist, waving it at the crowd. "It's all a lie. All of it. None of you people have the guts to say it, so I will. Kristy's just using this place as a crutch, and the rest of you are suckers for coming here and thinking it means anything."

He started tearing down the flyers, one after another, making a show of it. The guests at the nearest table scooted their chairs back, half in horror, half in anticipation of

what would happen next.

Tanner moved fast, sidestepping between Mark and the nearest group of onlookers. He kept his voice measured. “You’re done. If you don’t leave, I’ll have you escorted out.”

Mark sneered. “Yeah? Who’s going to do it? You and your band of has-beens?” He jerked his chin at Aiden, who was already crossing the room with Zach, and Connor, who had his phone out and was calling someone—probably the Chief.

Mark’s bottle slipped out of his hand, clattering across the floor and leaking whiskey all over. He staggered and tried to grab the edge of a table but only managed to tip over another auction basket. This one shattered, and the glassware inside went everywhere.

At that, Emily stood up from her post near the thermometer board. Her voice, crisp and clear, cut across the bedlam: “Event security will call the sheriff if you don’t leave right now.”

Mark shot her a look of pure loathing. “Oh, good. The fun police.”

Aiden and Zach reached him at the same time. Zach, all smiles, put a hand on Mark’s arm, saying, “Hey man, let’s get some air, okay?” Aiden’s grip was less gentle—he herded Mark toward the door with the unspoken promise of what would happen if he resisted.

Mark wasn’t done putting on his show, though. He twisted in their grasp, pointing at Kristy one last time. “You think you’re so much better than the rest of us? Go ahead. Hide behind your ex-cop boyfriend. See how long that keeps you warm at night.”

Kristy didn’t say a word, but the hurt in her eyes was impossible to miss. Tanner

wanted to gather her into his arms, to say something, anything, that would make this better. But now wasn't the time.

Aiden and Zach hauled Mark through the barn doors and out into the parking lot. The second he was gone, the whole room let out a collective breath—relief, embarrassment, and maybe a little bit of disappointment from those who'd hoped for a fight.

The music started up again, but it was half-hearted. Nobody danced. People made excuses to leave. Even the teenagers stopped filming and retreated to the far end of the barn, away from the broken glass and spilled whiskey and wine.

Tanner stayed where he was, glancing around the room, taking in the ruined auction table, the toppled decorations, the faces of the guests—most of them looking anywhere but at Kristy or him.

He finally turned to her. She was picking up shards of glass with her bare hands, shoulders hunched, jaw clenched so hard he thought her teeth might break.

He crouched down beside her, reaching for the bigger pieces. "Let me," he gently whispered.

She didn't look at him. "I've got it."

He waited, hands steady until she finally set the glass down and wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm.

"He always does this," she murmured.

"I know, but he's gone now."

She snorted. “Until next time.”

He didn’t argue. There would be a next time; he was sure of it.

They finished cleaning in silence. Rhonda brought over a roll of paper towels, her face tight with anger. “You want me to call the sheriff and have him do a drive-by around your house? Just in case?”

Kristy shook her head. “No. He’s so drunk, only thing he’s going to do is go home and sleep this off.”

Tanner wasn’t so sure, but he let it go. Instead, he helped Rhonda re-stack what was left of the auction items. He could feel the eyes on him, every guest in the barn measuring him up, waiting to see if he’d lose it like Mark had.

He didn’t. He just kept cleaning, kept busy, kept his mouth shut.

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When the room was finally back in order—or as close as it would get—Kristy stood up, dusted off her hands, and walked to the front of the barn. She faced the crowd, what was left of it, and forced a smile.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said, voice steady. “We appreciate your support, and we hope you’ll keep helping us make this town better. There’s still coffee and dessert at the back. Please enjoy the rest of your night.”

A smattering of applause, polite and strained.

She stepped off the makeshift stage and walked straight outside.

Tanner hesitated, then followed. The night was cold and black, the sky clear with sparkling stars. It would have been the perfect, romantic setting to finally make his move and kiss her if it hadn’t been for the chaos otherwise known as Mark.

He found her leaning against the hood of her car, arms wrapped tight around her middle. He stopped a few paces away. “You okay?”

She didn’t answer right away. She looked up, tears glimmering but not falling. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“You didn’t,” he assured her, and it was true. “You didn’t drag me anywhere. I volunteered.”

She tried to smile, but it was too hard.

He wanted to reach out, to put a hand on her shoulder, but he knew that kind of touch would only make things worse. Instead, he told her, “You did good in there. You kept it together. Most people would’ve cracked.”

She took a shaky breath. “It feels like I did.”

Tanner shook his head. “Not even close. You’re stronger than you know, Kristy.”

He watched her for another minute, making sure she was steady, then went back inside to finish what needed to be done.

The rest of the night was a blur. The guests trickled out in ones and twos, each offering Tanner a sad smile or a murmured apology. By the time the barn was empty, it felt like the whole event had never happened. Just a pile of debris and a handful of tired people holding themselves together as best they could.

Tanner counted the cash twice before he believed the total. He’d never seen money disappear so fast—one minute the thermometer was rocketing up, and the next, half the guest list was gone, leaving behind only a few crumpled twenties and a fistful of loose change. Maybe if Mark hadn’t wrecked everything, maybe if people had stayed and paid for the remaining auction items, maybe if the world just worked a little differently, they’d have made it.

He stood at the donation table, hands braced on the edge, shoulders hunched. The barn was almost empty now. Two volunteers swept the far corner, heads ducked, not talking. Kristy and Rhonda worked in silence at the dessert station, boxing up leftover cupcakes, faces pinched and tired.

He could see the mess Mark left—a splatter of whiskey, streaks from someone’s muddy boots, a crater where the auction display had been. A couple of the vases were broken, wildflowers scattered like the aftermath of a bad prom. Above it all, the

fundraiser thermometer glared back at him, the red marker line stuck short of the “SURVIVAL” mark.

He didn’t hear Joe and Emily approach until Joe set a heavy hand on his shoulder. “You did good, son.”

Emily was right behind, tablet in one hand, phone in the other. She took in the wreckage with a single, clinical sweep, lips pressed tight. “I’ll update the franchise ledger,” she said, mostly to herself. “But it’s not going to be enough.”

Tanner nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He could feel the eyes of every person still in the barn—maybe not looking at him directly, but waiting for him to do something, anything, to make it better.

Joe dropped his hand and walked the room, picking up stray trash and setting chairs back in order. When he came back around, he leaned in close. “Sometimes you do everything right, and it still goes sideways. That’s not your fault.”

Tanner stared at the money on the table. “I thought we had a chance,” he whispered, voice rough. “We were so close.”

Emily looked at her tablet, fingers moving fast. “Close isn’t enough in this market,” she told him, and it wasn’t mean, just true. “But you did move the needle. If you want to try again, maybe with a different approach?—”

He shook his head. “I’m not putting Kristy through another night like this.”

Joe sighed. “She’s tougher than you think.”

Tanner almost laughed, but it came out as a grunt. “She’s tough. She’s not made of stone.”

There was a silence, the kind that never gets filled.

Emily turned, scanning the barn. Her gaze landed on Kristy, who was wiping down a table so hard it looked like she might rub the finish off. “I’m sure she’ll bounce back.”

Tanner didn’t answer. He just kept counting the money, hoping the total would magically change if he glared at it hard enough.

After a minute, Joe patted his shoulder again. “Why don’t we take a walk, son.”

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Tanner followed him outside. The air was sharp and cold, slicing through the sweat on his skin. They walked to the far end of the gravel lot, where Joe leaned against the hood of a battered pickup and stared up at the stars.

Joe said nothing for a long time. When he finally spoke, it was low. “It’s not the end, you know. God has a way of working out situations even when we think there’s no way.”

Tanner shook his head. “I want to believe that, but I can’t ask people to come to another fundraiser. Not after what just happened.”

Joe smiled, sad and soft. “Sometimes you just take what you get, and you try again tomorrow.”

“But I’m running out of time,” Tanner grumbled with a shake of his head.

“Look, I’ll cover the next payroll. Don’t tell Emily, she’ll kill me. You want to keep running this place, you’ve got my blessing. But if you want out—if you want to walk away—I’ll take the blame for it.”

Tanner shook his head again. “That’s a generous offer.”

“Don’t take too long to think about it. Like you said, you’re running out of time.”

They headed back toward the barn. The lights were off now, except for a dim bulb over the entry. Kristy stood in the doorway, arms folded tight across her chest. She looked like she’d been crying, but she’d already wiped her face clean.

Joe tipped his hat to her and walked past, muttering something about “tomorrow’s another day.” Emily joined him, her phone already at her ear, coordinating a “contingency plan.”

Tanner hung back, watching Kristy. She didn’t move, didn’t say anything.

“Joe says we can try again. He’s giving us another shot.”

Kristy stared at the ground, hair falling over her face. “I don’t think I can do this again. Not after tonight. Mark is just going to keep ruining everything.”

He nodded, doing his best to hide his hurt over her letting Mark come between them. “I get it.”

She looked up, eyes red but steady. “Are you going to keep the shop open?”

He thought about it. Thought about every mistake, every lost dollar, every time he’d let the team down. He thought about the first time he’d seen her, laughing behind the counter and the way she’d made even the worst days feel like they mattered. Such a sharp contrast to how she looked now, and all he could think about was how this was all his fault.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s time to let it go.”

She flinched, just a little.

He wanted to say more, but the words wouldn’t come.

Instead, he watched her turn, slow and small, and walk out into the night.

He waited until she was gone before he locked the barn, flicked off the last light, and

let the dark swallow everything behind him.

Chapter Thirteen

Kristy spent the next morning on her couch, wearing a hoodie three sizes too big and staring at her phone like it held the answers to world peace. Her apartment looked like a donation bin had gotten in a fight with a grocery store and lost: empty seltzer cans, takeout containers, and a random sock draped over her lamp like it were auditioning for the role of mood lighting. The sun wasn't even up yet. Kristy wasn't sure she'd slept.

Her phone was filled with photos of the fundraiser—before it went full disaster. The barn was lit up and alive, strings of LED lights everywhere, the crowd thick and noisy, everyone smiling. There were shots of the auction table, still intact, baskets of gourmet popcorn and those weird local hot sauces, and people actually dancing. She flipped through them, heart squeezing with every swipe until the sequence reached the moment Mark's whiskey-red face ruined everything. The videos started then, from the high schoolers' phones—his voice, his ranting, the crash of glass, and the popcorn flying.

Kristy watched it twice, just to punish herself. She wished she could blame him for all of it, but mostly, she just felt like an idiot for thinking she could ever change the world with a coffee shop, a bake sale, and some borrowed string lights.

A text came in at 7:09 a.m. It was Nurse Gomez, who always woke up with the sun. "If you need anything, let me know. Ignore the jerks. You're the best." Kristy choked on a laugh, then set her phone face down on the pillow beside her. She stared at the ceiling. Wondered if this was what rock bottom looked like. Not a dramatic collapse but a slow, heavy sinking.

She almost called Tanner. She pictured him in his apartment, sitting in the dark,

maybe drinking a beer at eight in the morning because what else was there to do? But she didn't call him. He needed time. He needed someone who could fix things, and Kristy was pretty sure she was the opposite of that right now.

What she needed was a plan or at least a lifeline. She scrolled her contacts until she hit "Erica Cruz Turner." Kristy let her thumb hover, heart racing, then hit call before she could talk herself out of it.

The line picked up on the second ring. "If this is about my children being banned from the after-school program again, I can explain," Erica started, voice crisp and amused. In the background, Kristy heard twin boys shrieking and, weirdly, a goat.

"It's not about your kids. It's about me," Kristy blurted.

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The shrieking stopped, like Erica's presence alone could will her offspring into silence. "Whoa, Kristy. I didn't look at the screen when I picked up. You okay?"

Kristy tried to breathe. "No? Maybe? I don't know." She squeezed her eyes shut. "The fundraiser was a disaster. Mark showed up and ruined everything. I think the shop is finished. I think I'm finished. I don't know what to do."

"I wish I could have been there, but I had a last-minute meeting. Zach had filled me in when I got him, but now I want to hear it from you," Erica demanded, all the breezy energy gone, replaced by full attention.

Kristy launched into it: the weeks of planning, the bake sale, the car wash, the chaos, the hope, the barn dance, the almost-kiss with Tanner, Mark's crash-landing, the aftermath, the final tally that left them two thousand dollars short and Kristy lower than she'd ever been. She didn't sugarcoat it, didn't make herself sound better. She just dumped it all, voice shaking and small, and waited for Erica to say she'd call back later or just hang up.

Instead, Erica spoke slowly, "Okay. I might have an idea." A rustle of paper, a clatter as if she was knocking stuff off a desk with one arm. "Come over. I'll make coffee and bribe the twins to leave us alone. Can you be here in an hour?"

Kristy's brain stalled. "I—yeah. I'll be there."

"Good. I'm not letting you turn into a tragic small-town legend."

Kristy hung up, the first bloom of hope in her chest since last night. It almost made

her cry all over again.

She slid off the couch, almost stepped on her laptop, and went to the bathroom. The mirror showed a mess: hair somewhere between “loose bun” and “feral,” eyes puffy, nose red. She splashed water on her face, wiped down with a towel that smelled like citrus and guilt, and started to look for real clothes.

She chose jeans and a green blouse, then changed three times before ending up back in jeans and a different blouse. She didn’t want to appear as though she was asking for a loan, but also didn’t want to look like she was above asking for one. She compromised by pulling her hair into a ponytail and dusting her cheeks with whatever powder was left in the bottom of an old compact. The effect was...less haggard. Good enough.

The drive to Erica’s was ten minutes, eight if you didn’t stop for the crosswalks in her neighborhood. Kristy made it in seven. She parked behind a Tesla with a “Boy Mom” sticker and a Jeep plastered with decals from every National Park in the continental U.S.

Erica’s house was the opposite of Kristy’s apartment. The driveway was professionally plowed, and the porch was decorated with an actual seasonal wreath instead of a tangle of expired delivery flyers. Even at 8:00 a.m. on a weekday, every window glowed with warm light.

She braced herself for the Turner boys—ten-year-old twins who had weaponized chaos—and rang the bell. Erica opened the door before the chime finished, dressed in yoga pants and a T-shirt that said “CEO of Snacks.” Her hair was perfect, her eyeliner sharper than a hypodermic.

“Get in here,” Erica ordered, dragging Kristy inside.

The house was pure Turner: giant dog, giant noise, walls covered with framed photos and vintage book collections. The boys were out back, launching something off the porch with a slingshot. The dog looked up, sniffed Kristy's shoes, then went back to sleep.

Erica led her to the kitchen, which already smelled like fresh bagels and the kind of coffee that was too expensive to admit you bought. "Sit," she commanded, sliding a mug across the counter.

Kristy sat, feeling half-human. Erica handed her a plate with an everything bagel the size of her face, with a side of cream cheese. "Eat. I can't help you if you faint."

Kristy took a bite, chewed, and tried not to sob at how good it tasted.

Erica waited, arms folded until Kristy looked up. "So. Let's save the Brave Badge."

Kristy set the bagel down, hands trembling. "I don't know if it's savable."

"Everyone thinks that. Right before something's saved." Erica smirked. "Now tell me exactly how much you need, what you tried already, and what you want to happen next."

Kristy did. She gave numbers, names, and every embarrassing detail. Erica listened, never interrupting except to scribble something on a notepad or refill her coffee.

When Kristy finished, Erica leaned back and cracked her knuckles. "All right. Here's what we do."

Kristy waited, pulse pounding.

"I'll invest in the business, not loan—invest. Silent partner, no weird strings." Erica's

expression was dead serious. “Consider it my way of paying it forward. Or atoning for the twins’ future crimes.”

Kristy blinked again. “That’s...amazing.”

Erica sipped her coffee and shrugged. “I have my moments.”

“But are you sure...”

“Let me worry about what I can do. You focus on making the Brave Badge the best it can be.” Erica leaned in. “Can you do that?”

Kristy nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Her mind was already whirring, recalculating the odds, reframing every failure as a pivot to what came next.

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Erica tapped her perfectly manicured fingernails on the counter. “You’re going to need to convince Tanner to take the offer. You can’t let him quit out of pride.”

A flush crept up Kristy’s neck. “I’ll talk to him. I just...I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell him that it’s worth it. That Clear Mountain needs the Brave Badge. And maybe, finally, tell him how you feel.”

Kristy almost dropped her mug. “It’s not like that.”

Erica laughed, but it was warm. “Sure it isn’t. But in case it is, don’t wait until the last minute.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kristy insisted.

Erica smirked. “You two are disgustingly cute. Have you noticed?”

Kristy blushed hard. “There’s nothing to notice.”

“Oh, please.” Erica rolled her eyes. “Even the twins know. And they think kissing is gross.”

Kristy made a face. “It’s not... I mean, we’re not...”

“Save it for the after party,” Erica teased, but her grin was kind. She reached over and pulled out a checkbook, wrote a check for twice what the coffee shop needed, and handed it over. “But seriously, you need to go and deliver this to Tanner without

another moment's delay."

Kristy stood, legs shaky but heart lighter. She hugged her friend tight. "You're a lifesaver."

"I know," Erica said, hugging back just as hard. "Now get out there and save your hero."

Kristy laughed, waved goodbye, and drove toward the Brave Badge with her heart lighter than it had been in weeks. She had a plan. She had a partner. And if she was lucky, she'd have a second chance.

Kristy stood outside the Brave Badge for a solid minute rehearsing what she was going to say. She could see Tanner at the bar, hunched over a tangle of papers, head down and still. If he noticed her standing there, he didn't give any sign.

She pushed the door open, but Tanner didn't look up. He was wearing an old Clear Mountain Search & Rescue hoodie, and the way his shoulders slumped made Kristy's throat hurt.

She crossed the floor, every step loud in the empty shop. "Hey," she said, voice small.

He grunted, just barely. She slid onto the stool next to him and waited. He kept writing, like maybe if he just ignored her, she'd vanish and take the problems with her.

Kristy looked at his hands, at the mess of numbers and red ink. "You ever going to talk to me again, or is this the silent treatment phase?"

He didn't answer, just scribbled another line, then finally dropped the pen. It rolled

away, slow and sad, and stopped against her wrist.

She nudged it back to him, then took the check out of her pocket and slid it toward him. “I brought you something.”

He didn’t look at it, just mumbled, “If it’s a bill, I can’t pay it.”

“It’s not a bill.” She tapped it, hands shaking. “It’s a solution. The real kind. Not a bake sale or a car wash. Something that actually will work.”

Tanner glanced at the check finally, quick and sharp, like he wanted to argue but didn’t have the energy. She took a deep breath. His eyes widened as he realized what was in front of him.

“Erica is going to partner with us.” The rest of the details came spilling out before he could interrupt her.

“I don’t want charity,” Tanner snapped. “It was bad enough running fundraisers, but taking money for nothing isn’t something I’m willing to do.”

“Erica doesn’t see it that way. She views it as making an investment to cover what we owe on rent and payroll, plus additional revenue to help propel us forward. Not a loan. An investment.” Kristy’s heart hammered, but she kept going. “It’s not charity. It’s a real shot. All we have to do is hold on.”

Tanner’s mouth tightened. He stared at the check, lips pressed so thin they nearly vanished. “An investment?”

Kristy nodded. “It’s not complicated. Sometimes, people just...want to help. Erica believes in the Brave Badge, and she believes in you, Tanner.” Kristy kept going, words tumbling out faster, like maybe she could break through his wall of

stubbornness by sheer velocity. “You told me once that being a cop was the only thing you were ever good at and that when you lost it, you lost yourself. But you built this. You built something that matters. Even if you don’t see it, I do. Erica does. The whole town does.”

He was silent for so long Kristy thought maybe she’d broken him for good. Finally, he exhaled, slow and rough. “Doesn’t feel like enough.”

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“It is,” she insisted, voice gentle. “You are.”

He looked at her, really looked, and she saw the exhaustion and the shame and all the things he’d never say out loud. He picked up the check and looked at it, shaking his head, almost as if he didn’t believe it was real.

“I was so scared. I thought it was going to lose this place and you.”

Her heart stuttered. “You’re not going to.”

He laughed, bitter. “Mark was right. I’m just playing house. I’m not cut out for this.”

Kristy reached out and covered his hand with hers. “Mark was wrong. You’re exactly what this town needs.”

“Just the town?” he asked with an arch of his eyebrow.

She inhaled sharply, realizing she needed to tell him how she felt. “No, not just the town. Me too. I care about you, Blaze. About this place. About all of it.”

He turned his hand, gripping hers like a lifeline. Finally, he spoke, voice raw. “I care about you, too. I have for a while, but I was too afraid to admit it.”

He stared at her, and something shifted. A muscle unclenched, a storm moved on. He stood, slow and stiff, and came around the counter. Kristy braced herself for a speech or a lecture or maybe just a “thanks for trying,” but he did none of those.

He pulled her in, arms tight, face buried in her shoulder. She felt his breath, shaky and warm, and she wrapped her own arms around his back, holding on as hard as she could.

They stood there, locked together until the ache in her chest was replaced by something steadier. Hope. Or maybe just the knowledge that she wasn't alone, not anymore.

When he finally pulled away, his eyes were damp, but his smile was real.

“We’re going to make it,” she told him.

He nodded, and his hand brushed her cheek, a touch so tender it made her breath catch. “Yeah. We are,” his voice a whisper this time.

The moment stretched between them, charged and silent, except for the quiet hum of the refrigerator somewhere behind. Then, without another word, Tanner leaned in closer. His eyes were intense, but not with the usual hardness she’d grown accustomed to; there was something soft, vulnerable even.

Kristy’s heart raced as she realized what was happening. This was the moment—the one she hadn’t even let herself imagine because it seemed too far out of reach.

His lips met hers in the most gentle of ways. The kiss was slow, exploring, as if he was memorizing the feel of her mouth against his. It wasn’t rushed or desperate; it was deliberate, meaningful—the kind of kiss that spoke of deep-seated feelings held back for far too long.

A warmth spread through Kristy, lighting up places inside her she hadn’t known were dark. She responded instinctively, her arms coming up to circle his neck, pulling him closer. The world narrowed down to the two of them, to the sweet pressure of his lips

on hers, to the solid reality of his presence against her.

When they finally parted, it was only by inches. Tanner rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed, breathing uneven. “I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” he confessed, his voice rough with emotion.

Kristy could only nod, her own voice lost somewhere between her rapidly beating heart and the lump in her throat. She felt dizzy with relief and happiness—a potent mix that made everything seem brighter, more hopeful.

“Ditto,” she managed to say at last.

Tanner opened his eyes then, and the look he gave her was so full of open affection it took her breath away all over again. He smiled slightly, the corner of his mouth tilting up in that rare smile that made him look years younger.

They stood there for several more moments, simply holding each other in the quiet. They didn’t need to say anything. The future was still a question mark, but for now, at least at this moment, they’d found all they needed in each other.

Epilogue

Tanner had faced down wildfires and mountain lions, and a man who’d taken five hostages into a snowbound cabin, but nothing rattled him like standing in the back room of his own coffee shop, clutching a single sheet of yellow legal pad paper, and sweating through his one good dress shirt.

He could hear the crowd through the thin wall, every cough and shuffle, and, every now and then, the high peel of Kristy’s laughter. She always found a way to laugh, to make everyone else feel like the world wasn’t ending, even if hers had nearly done so a dozen times. He glanced down at the page. His handwriting looked like a drunk

doctor's prescription: messy, forceful, but no denying who'd written it.

He tried reading through his notes again, but the words didn't sound right. Too formal. Too practiced. He wanted to say something that would stick, not just to Kristy, but to the whole crowd—make it impossible for anyone to miss what she'd meant to this place, to him. But whenever he imagined actually saying it, his brain shut down, and his throat dried up.

He ran a hand over his jaw, feeling the stubble he'd meant to shave. He'd even tried to slick his hair, but it rebelled, spiking up at the crown like always. The new shirt—courtesy of Rhonda, who'd left it in the manager's office with a note, "Wear this or else"—was a dark blue button-down, sleeves rolled once, untucked over a pair of new black slacks. He looked like a guy who'd tried, but not so hard that anyone would mock him for it.

His hands were shaking. Just a little, but enough. He balled the legal pad page, then smoothed it, then balled it again.

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He didn't do this. He was not a speechmaker. He was a cop, or had been, until the crash. Then, a coffee shop owner, at best. Now he was—what? A team mascot? The majority partner? He wasn't even sure anymore. Except Kristy made him want to be something else, something more. She made him want to stand up and let people see him instead of always holding back.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture the scene outside. Rhonda was working the crowd, probably hyping up the lemon loaf, and maybe passing around coffee samples. Emily and Joe were holding court in the back, but really watching for any signs of trouble, like the place would combust if they let their guard down. Kristy was up front, probably already running a not-so-silent side commentary to whoever had the misfortune to sit next to her.

He loved her for that. For all of it. For the fact that she'd thrown herself into his world, into the Brave Badge, without asking permission and without apologizing. For the fact that she hadn't let Mark or any of her ghosts stop her. For the fact that she'd saved him, even if he was too stubborn to admit it for a long time.

He folded the speech, stuffed it in his pocket, and stared at the closed door. He could change his mind. Do this in private. But Kristy deserved for him to do it this way, something grand that made her feel as special as she was.

The room was full, every chair taken, the buzz of conversation dying instantly as he stepped out. He scanned the crowd and found Kristy in the front row. Her hair was down, shoulders loose, and a faint smile on her lips. She saw him, and her eyes lit up, a spark that made the rest of the room blur. He made it to the podium and rested both hands on either side, anchoring himself so he wouldn't float off.

Aiden nodded at him from the back, a subtle “go get ‘em” that actually made him feel better.

He looked at his notes, then at the crowd, then straight at Kristy. The rest of the world could wait. This was for her.

He cleared his throat, voice coming out rougher than he meant. “Thanks for coming,” he started, and the crowd hushed even more. “I’ll keep this short since I know Rhonda’s got enough lemon loaf in the back to sink a rescue boat.”

Scattered chuckles. Kristy smiled wider.

He looked down at his notes again, then set them aside. “I was never much for speeches. Or coffee, if I’m honest. But I’m good at knowing what matters when I see it. The Brave Badge is still here because of all of you and because of one person who refused to give up, even when I’d already written it off.”

He paused and caught Kristy’s eye again. “Kristy Howard is the heart of this place. She’s the reason we made it when times got tough.”

People started clapping. Not a lot, but enough. He let it happen, then raised his hands to quiet them.

He took a breath. “But that’s not what I wanted to say. This meeting isn’t about business. Not really. It’s about something else.”

He locked eyes with her, letting the words sit there. He’d practiced them a dozen times, but they felt better raw. “It’s about second chances. And knowing when to take them.”

His voice cracked. He didn’t care.

He gripped the podium so hard his knuckles went white. “I owe this place and all of you more than I can say. But I owe Kristy the most. She gave me back my life. And I want her to know—” He faltered, blinked, and tried again. “I want her to know she’s my future.”

It got so quiet he could hear the espresso machine cycling in the back.

He looked at Kristy, and nothing else mattered.

He stepped out from behind the podium, nerves gone, and said the only thing that was left. “I love you, Kristy, and I can’t spend another minute living without you as my wife. Will you marry me?” He got down on one knee and pulled out a ring box.

But Kristy didn’t move. Not at first. Tanner watched the color climb up her cheeks, watched her struggle to catch up with what he’d just said and done.

The words replayed in his head, louder and clumsier with every second. He almost wanted to snatch them back, put them in order, and try again. But he didn’t. He couldn’t.

She stood up, but not all the way. It was more like her body had decided to move without her brain’s permission, and now she was stuck in some weird halfway position between sitting and running. She blinked at him, and he realized she might actually cry.

“I—” she started, but her voice cracked. She shook her head, then tried again. “You really mean it?”

Tanner nodded and pulled the ring from the box. “I meant every word.”

Kristy’s eyes glistened, the soft glow of hope and astonishment mingling together as

she looked down at Tanner. The room was silent, waiting, a collective breath held.

“Yes,” she finally whispered, voice trembling but clear. “Yes, I will marry you.”

A cheer erupted from the crowd, a wave of clapping and whooping that seemed to shake the walls of the Brave Badge. Tanner stood up, his face breaking into a wide, relieved smile as he slid the ring onto Kristy's finger. It fit perfectly like it was meant to be there all along.

The twins high-fived, then started a chant: “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” The whole front row picked it up, and even the adults joined in, voices growing louder until it filled the Brave Badge like a marching band.

Tanner looked down at Kristy. She was still crying, but now she was laughing, too, her whole face lit up. He cupped her jaw with both hands carefully, and kissed her—soft at first, then harder, because he wanted her to know he meant every word.

The crowd went insane.

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He heard chairs scraping and feet stomping. Someone banged a coffee mug on a table. In the far corner, Joe shouted, "That's how you do it, son."

Kristy wiped her eyes, then poked him in the chest. "You couldn't have warned me first?"

"Would've chickened out," he admitted.

She grinned, shaky but so bright it made his throat close up. "You know this is going to be all over social by the time we close tonight, right?"

He shrugged, and for once, the thought didn't scare him. "Let them talk."

She kissed him again, quick and fierce. "I will."

Rhonda led the charge toward them, her face split with a grin as she ushered others forward. "Let's celebrate," she declared, and with that command, the room transformed. Music started up, festive and loud. Plates piled high with lemon loaf and cups brimming with coffee passed through the hands of friends and well-wishers.

Zach clapped Tanner on the back so hard he nearly stumbled forward. "Didn't think you had it in you," he teased with a grin.

Erica wiped a discreet tear from her eye before fixing Kristy with a look of fierce approval. "You two are good for each other," she stated more than suggested.

As guests came up to congratulate them, Aiden gave Tanner a thumbs-up from across

the room while Lindsay wiped tears from her cheeks with a napkin. The community's warmth enveloped them; every handshake and hug infused with genuine happiness for their engagement.

Later in the evening, when the crowd thinned out, and the noise died down to comfortable murmurs and soft laughter, Tanner and Kristy found themselves alone by the window watching the shadows play on the street outside.

Kristy leaned her head against Tanner's shoulder. "I can't believe you did that in front of everyone," she murmured.

Tanner chuckled softly. "Seemed like the right time," he confessed. "And I guess I wanted everyone to see just how serious I am about us."

"You really surprised me," Kristy admitted. "In the best way."

He smiled at her, tired and a little raw. "This is your last chance to run, you know."

She shook her head. "Not going anywhere."

He leaned toward her and placed a kiss on her lips. "Good. Because I have big plans for us."

She could hear the smile in his voice. "Like what?"

"We can add a back eating area and start serving lunch."

"That's not a bad idea. What if we also add a dog rescue?"

"Really? Dogs and coffee?"

"What, it could be great," she tried to convince him.

He ran a hand through her hair. “Whatever you want, Kristy.”

She went quiet, then looked at him with something almost shy. “I just want you.”

He kissed her again, slow and careful, and for the first time in forever, he felt like the world could be good. Like maybe he was allowed to want things and be happy.

They stood together in silence for a moment before Tanner spoke again, his voice soft but carrying a weight of sincerity that made Kristy turn to look at him. “With everything we’ve been through, I know there won’t be anything we can’t handle together.”

Kristy smiled up at him, her eyes reflecting both the soft lighting of the shop and all the love she felt for this man who’d turned her life into an unexpected but beautiful adventure. “I believe that,” she said simply.

Tanner pulled her closer, memorizing the moment. The past didn’t matter. The future would figure itself out. All that counted was right here, right now, and the way Kristy felt in his arms. He’d never been more sure of anything in his life.