

K.C. Fontero must rescue her ex's sister from white supremacists.

Land of Entrapment

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LAND of ENTRAPMENT



A K.C. Fontero Mystery

Andi Marquette

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Chapter One

“MAMAS, DON’T LET your daughters...” I sang, pulling the bale of alfalfa off the stack and hefting it into place in the back of the pick-up. “No, don’t let ‘em grow up to be scary-ass sociologists like me.” Another bale, another impromptu verse. “Mamas, don’t let your sociologists research neo-Nazis.” A pause to rest in the central Texas heat, then I started bouncing up and down, the truck moving with me. “Mamas, don’t let your daughters grow up to be college professors ‘cause all they do is write boring books.” Two-stepping in place now, turning a circle in the back of the truck. “Unless they’re working on Grandpa’s farm between semesters, oh, yeah. Hell, mamas! Don’t let your daughters fry to death in a fucking Texas summer!” I hollered the last lyric and started laughing. “Sorry, Willie. It used to be a good song until now.”

I stopped dancing and pushed the brim of my battered straw cowboy hat back and squinted in the sun, watching a cloud of dust that marked a vehicle’s approach and waiting for the sound of its engine. Out here, neighbors know each other by the sound of car engines. The dust cloud slowed at Grandpa’s quarter-mile driveway and hesitated before making the right-hand turn toward the house, picking its way slowly down the deeply rutted stretch.

Nope, didn’t recognize the engine or the vehicle, a black SUV. Some rancher’s kid from college stopping by, maybe. Or a tourist off the beaten path. Possibly a townie. Shrugging mentally, I continued loading bales of alfalfa into the pick-up from the monumental stack that last season’s harvest had generated.

“Mamas, don’t let your daughters stay out in the sun too long.” I shoved another bale against the cab and the truck’s bed shuddered. Ick. Even my hands were sweating. Prickly bits of alfalfa clung to my wrists and fingers inside my gloves. “Mamas, if your daughters say they want to research neo-Nazis, just say no. Because they’ll end up in Texas!” I paused and stood watching as the newcomer pulled to a stop in front of the main house. *Nice rig*. Way too nice for these parts. Grandpa came out of the house, trying to calm Barb, who was on the

verge of apoplexy as she ran circles around the vehicle. She was a dog of extreme moods. Dan and Perry tended to be the more methodical and thoughtful of the group and probably had already peed all over those nice new tires. Jane, the baby of the batch, stood on the porch's top step, watching Grandpa talk to the visitor through the driver's side window.

Sweat was collecting in the waistband of my jeans. I hate that. During a central Texas summer, the heat fogs your brain and wrings every drop of sweat from your pores. It hangs in the air like heavy clouds and follows you like Grandpa's heelers. You can sit inside and watch the heat sniff around your windows and doors or you can try to out-drive it, but it's always as fast or as slow as your vehicle and when you stop, it glares at you like a pissed off ex-girlfriend.

A central Texas summer isn't a season so much as a state of mind. I sighed heavily and hauled another bale off the stack. "Mamas, why'd you let your daughters leave New Mexico?" Two years since I'd left Albuquerque. God, I missed the dry heat. And the landscape. I shoved the bale into place. The Texas sun beat on my bare arms, which were already the color of topsoil. I tried not to think too much about the consequences of my UV exposure. Time to worry about that come fall. "Dammit, mamas, you know your daughters hate Texas," I sang, stomping my foot. "So why, mamas, didn't you get your daughters teaching fellowships in New Mexico?"

I grabbed the hem of my old white Indigo Girls concert tee and flapped it, trying to generate a breeze. I had cut the sleeves so that most of my biceps were exposed. The extra air flow was delicious when a breeze decided to stop by. Grandpa always expressed Puritan disapproval about my summer fashion. I told him that the cows didn't care what I wore as long as I fed them. That, plus threatening to lose the shirt entirely and just work in my jog-bra or half-naked, tended to win the argument with him.

The visitor hadn't gotten out of the SUV. Probably someone just needing directions. Grandpa would handle it. "Mamas, your daughters are scary in the heat," I said under my breath, grabbing another bale off the stack. "And your daughters would rather be back in New Mexico eating green chile." A shadow from the nearby silo crawled imperceptibly east. My work would be long done here before it offered any shade. I grunted and heaved another bale onto the truck's bed, maneuvering it into position. A rhythm developed, as I reached for another, looping my gloved fingers through the twine. Loop, lift, fling. Grunt for good measure. Loop...

"Howdy, Cowgirl."

There are times in people's lives when something so completely unexpected happens that their brains lose all ability to send messages to arms and legs. This was just such a time. And even if I'd

wanted to turn toward the source of the voice, I was physically incapable of it. Instead, I chanted over and over in my head, *Please, please, please. It's a bad dream. A really, really bad dream. Please, please, please...*

"I always said nobody looked better in boots and jeans than you, Professor Fontero."

Against my will—it's truly amazing how your body can completely betray your best interests—my fingers untangled themselves from the twine and I turned to the woman I hoped so desperately was not really standing there. No deal. She spoke again.

"Hi, K.C."

The memories I had spent nearly three years filing carefully away in the warehouse of my heart suddenly appeared on the loading dock. I can speak, generally, but in this instant, it wasn't happening. "Melissa. I—"

"Didn't expect you," she finished gently. She smiled wanly, looked away, then looked back just as quickly. I could barely see her eyes behind her sunglasses. I felt shaky and cold, an odd sensation in the heat.

"I'm—" she started. Her voice broke and she looked at the ground. Teva sport sandals graced her feet and comfortably faded denim shorts hugged her still trim, athletic body much better than my memory served. A white T-shirt completed her ensemble. *Damn. Still gorgeous. How unfair.*

She regained control. "I'm sorry to interrupt you like this, but I need to talk to you."

What she meant was that she was sorry to invade what we both knew was a haven from the failed relationship whose bones I'd left back in Albuquerque. I shrugged, staring down at her from the truck. "You wouldn't have if it wasn't important," I finally offered, numb. All the bad memories I'd tried to sort through over the last three years hovered in the thick air between us.

I got down slowly, not realizing I was actually doing so, and joined her on the ground. I was still four inches taller than Melissa, though she seemed taller—time and my imagination hadn't diminished her. She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. Hair the color of Swiss chocolate, that my own hands once brushed away from her face.

We stood regarding each other. I noticed a silver chain around her neck. It looked like the chain I had bought her in Italy four years ago. She saw me staring at it.

"I never took it off," she said softly as she took a step toward me. More than anything, I wanted to hug her. And that scared me.

"Don't," I heard myself whisper. No matter how badly I wanted to, I couldn't have her touching me. I needed to maintain some sense

of control, of pride. Her hands dropped to her sides. I abruptly pulled my gloves off and shoved them into a back pocket, trying to dispel the moment. "Well. You're here. So let's talk. Would you like something to drink?" I winced. My hostess mode always steps in when I'm having a problem with reality. I'm not sure if this is a good or bad thing. It might be inappropriate in certain situations. *Sir, before you kidnap me and make it look like I died in an accident, would you care for a sandwich?*

"Yes. That'd be great." She followed me as my steps automatically traced the tire-packed track back to the house fifty yards away. Dan and Perry left Grandpa's side and cautiously sniffed Melissa's feet as we neared the large covered porch where he sat in his favorite chair, a big wooden rocker. Barb lurked behind him, eyeing Melissa suspiciously. Jane leaned contentedly against Grandpa's leg, watching as we climbed the steps. My boots clunked on the wood.

"You want some tea, Grandpa?"

He shook his head in typical response.

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"I've got some business to attend to here. I'll finish the load afterward. Why don't you take a break, too?"

"Think I will," he said quietly, folding his hands across his stomach. It was a ritual we had. He would never admit how his arthritis pained him so I would give him the leeway he required to leave his work for a bit until his feet quit hurting. And he also wanted to make sure I was okay.

I opened the screen door and motioned Melissa through. The dogs all relaxed, evidently deciding that things were under control. They'd fly off the handle if necessary. Melissa followed me into the kitchen through the low-ceilinged, spacious living room—Grandpa called it "the parlor"—and the dining room. Time stopped in this house around 1942 and the furnishings reflected it. The kitchen, however, was an early twenty-first-century testament to technological innovation, courtesy of yours truly, my parents, two neighbor guys, and my cousin Luke. We'd lowered the cabinets, installed new countertops, tiled the floor midnight blue, and bought a refrigerator, microwave, new range, and dishwasher. I knew Grandpa found it easier to get to things he needed and he loved the microwave, though he complained the whole time the kitchen was under renovation.

I washed my hands and set two glasses on the counter before digging ice out of the freezer and taking the big jug of tea out of the fridge. Tea straight from the front porch. There's nothing quite like sun tea after you've been wrung out in a Texas summer day. I filled

both glasses, feeling Melissa's eyes on me.

"Is your grandpa okay?"

"Yeah. His arthritis is a little worse, but he's doing all right." I put the tea back.

She picked up a glass and took her sunglasses off, exposing her blue-grey eyes. *Dang*. When she raised her eyebrows in a mute question, I motioned her to the screened back porch, where I had set up a yellow lawn table and chairs a month ago. Grandpa liked to sit out there in the evenings, watching sunsets splash the fields.

She and I sat down at the same time, Melissa across from me, and I tossed my hat onto an adjoining chair. I took a long pull from my glass, waiting, feeling raw and numb at the same time, like when an ornery horse dragged me a hundred feet down the driveway last fall. I limped the first two weeks of the new semester, earning some points with my students from ranching families.

"You really look wonderful, Kase."

A strange rapport occurs between ex-lovers. You can say things to each other without worrying about ramifications, repercussions, or social mores. After all, the worst that could happen—other than dying—already did. There's no need to impress and each statement is truthfully simple, uttered for no reason other than blunt observation. Had I looked like shit, on the other hand, Melissa would not have mentioned my appearance. But the implications would be clear: *"Woo-wee, Kase. These years have not been good to you. Lose some weight, girlfriend. Get a life."*

"Thanks. You're looking fantastic as ever yourself." I meant it.

"Texas has been good to you, then?"

I nodded. "Good enough, I guess." I swirled my tea and the ice clinked in the glass. "How did you know I'd be here at Grandpa's?"

"A feeling. And I found out you weren't teaching this summer."

I nodded again, for lack of anything else to do. Another silence descended. I heard, faintly, the creaking of Grandpa's rocker and the thump-thump-thump of a canine hind leg as one of the dogs scratched.

"K.C., I thought—"

I interrupted her. "Why are you here?" There was a hard edge to my voice. I could see its reflection in her expression. She dropped her gaze and her lower lip trembled slightly. *Dammit*. "I mean..." *Damn, damn, damn*. I took a deep breath. "I mean that I don't think we should talk about that. Later, maybe." Without thinking, I reached across the table for her hand. I suddenly realized what I was doing and jerked it back to my lap. She noticed.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Of all the things she could have said, that was the one I didn't want to hear. It threatened to destroy my resolve. *Please don't let her*

see me cry. I rubbed my eyes, intensely relieved that my fingers came away dry. "Just tell me why you're here."

She sighed, the old *you can be so stubborn but I'm usually right* sigh I remembered too well for my own emotional well-being. "Megan's gone." Melissa stared hard at the tabletop.

I sat back, caught somewhere between shock and anxiety. "What do you mean, gone?"

"She took off about a month ago. We haven't seen her since."

I didn't miss the *we*. "Did you call the police?"

Melissa jerked her gaze back to me. "They can't do anything. Megan's twenty-one. She's considered an adult. Besides, she's been calling."

I stared at her, perplexed. "So why are you saying she's gone? What's the problem?"

"She's calling from different numbers and she's not using her ATM card." Melissa looked pointedly at me. "And I think she's in questionable company."

Okay, I thought. So Melissa trucked herself out here to a broiling part of Texas because her younger sister ran off with a guy. I hadn't seen Melissa in nearly three years and the only reason she came calling was to tell me that Megan's keeping "questionable company." My skepticism must have been obvious because she continued, impatiently.

"I think her boyfriend is a neo-Nazi."

Now *that* was a different matter. I knew Megan had some issues growing up, but she seemed okay even after Melissa and I had parted ways. "Why would you think that?"

"His tattoos, for one. He only wears long-sleeved shirts around us, but a week before Megan disappeared, he showed up at a barbecue at our house and he had his sleeves unbuttoned but not rolled up. He reached for something and I saw that he's got a swastika on his left forearm."

"Oh, hell." I sighed and shifted into analytical mode, always a safe way for me to deal with my emotional shortcomings. "Well, maybe he's seen the light and hasn't had it removed yet. Does he know about you and Hillary?"

"Yes. When Megan first introduced him to us, she said that Hillary and I were partners."

"So has he done anything that would make you think he's still running with a bad crowd?"

"No. That's just it. He was always very polite and friendly to me and Hillary and he seemed to like Megan a lot. But when she disappeared, I went to her apartment and found all kinds of...of really horrible pamphlets, full of racist bullshit and stuff about the white race and...K.C., it made me physically sick. To think that

Megan might be getting into that.”

It generated a physical reaction in me, as well. My stomach clenched. “Had she been saying anything strange, acting differently toward you? Maybe it was subtle and you didn’t catch it. Think.”

Melissa fell silent. “No.” She paused. “Wait. She asked me about two months ago why I thought I was gay. She’s never asked me that. She’s always just... It’s never even really been a topic of discussion.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her I was born this way and she asked me why, if there’s a genetic component, *she* wasn’t gay. Never mind the fact that we only share one parent. But I told her that the latest studies—you know, trying to use science—suggest that whatever goes on *in utero* might have something to do with it. That the way hormones interact in the uterus—you know what I’m talking about, right?”

I nodded. I’d seen the latest studies, too.

“And then she asked if that was true, could I take hormones and change it?” Melissa stared at me, intense. “What the hell do you say to that?”

I didn’t know. So I waited.

Melissa brushed hair out of her face. “I told her that nobody knew for sure what the hormone cocktail did or was made up of in the womb and that there was no way to alter the hard-wiring of your brain, which is what happens when you’re *in utero* and when your hormones continue to work on you throughout your life.”

“And what was her response?”

“She just kind of shrugged and said she had heard that you could change your sexual orientation and then Cody called—”

“Cody? That’s the boyfriend?” I interrupted.

“Yes. And she took the call and said she had to go.”

I chewed my lip, thinking. “Did she bring it up again after that?”

“No.”

“Has she said anything about your grandma?”

Melissa shook her head, sad. “She stopped talking to her.”

Oh, hell. Melissa’s Nez Perce grandmother lived in Oregon. She had married a white man and their kids married other whites, as well. Still, Melissa was close to her grandmother and her Native roots. Megan was the child of Melissa’s father and his second wife. Because of dad, Megan and Melissa shared their Native American grandmother. I sat back. “It sounds like this guy’s not trying to leave the movement and that he’s recruiting Megan.”

Melissa watched me, lips drawn in a thin, tight line.

“Here’s the hard part,” I said gently. “She’s an adult. And you can’t really tell her what she can and cannot do. The police can’t do anything about this unless one of them has committed a crime.

Belonging to a white supremacist group is not a crime in this country. I'm sorry." She looked at me and I could see tears in her eyes, which made me want to hug her. I refrained, with a mighty internal effort.

"But what if you think they *might* commit a crime?" she pressed. I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think she really wants to be with Cody or his group. Not anymore, anyway. She calls about once a week and she's vague about where they are, but some of the stuff she says makes me think that she's waking up to what's happening here. And if she really did totally buy into Cody's message, why is she still calling her dyke sister?"

"What does she say to make you think she's not on board?" I leaned back in my chair, mentally calling up my research files.

"It's not so much what she says, it's how she says it. She'll say that she's fine and everything's fine and she doesn't want me to worry about her and then she'll say weird shit like if I think it's wrong to take money from corporations and give it to struggling Americans."

"What?" I furrowed my brows in thought.

"Remember I told you that back in the late eighties I was involved in ActUP! And QueerNation and all those groups that protested Reagan's response to AIDS?"

"Yeah." I had done that, too.

"Okay, Megan knows I did that stuff and she knows that I rag on corporate interests and I've told her that if you believe in something, you should fight for it. Except I never thought she'd believe in the supremacy of the white race, especially after knowing you and what you research." Melissa paused for a moment. "Anyway, she asked about belief and what it might take to make you believe something. I told her that belief was a really powerful thing but it could also work against you and it could make some people do bad things, things that hurt others. And she said she had to go and she hung up."

I tugged on my chin, listening.

"I asked her why she just doesn't come home and she said that she has something to do that's bigger than herself but something in her voice... I don't think she wants to be part of it anymore."

"Do you think she's being held against her will?"

"I don't know." Melissa sighed. "Pressure from a group..."

"Cult."

She looked at me, surprised. "Is this a cult?"

"What my research shows is, yes. White supremacist groups are like cults. There's usually a charismatic leader who convinces others to follow his—the leader's usually male—example and then the underlings perpetuate the message and actively recruit outsiders.

The group controls access to information through whatever means, whether peer pressure, threats to tell the leader, appeals to your convictions, things like that. You're indoctrinated with the beliefs of the group through constant repetition and constant reinforcement." *Jesus, I sound like a documentary.*

"The group controls information?"

"Yeah. And eventually, you come to think that any outside news or information is suspect and part of the larger conspiracy that the group's leaders and indoctrinated members are trying to convince you is real." I ran a hand through my hair. "See, not many people think of white supremacists as a cult so there isn't really a network of de-programmers."

"People who get you out of a cult." She reached for her iced tea, avoiding my eyes.

"Exactly. It's an approach to white supremacists that I've been digging around in for the past couple of years especially. Anyway, de-programmers help those who leave the groups adjust to real life outside the cult. However, even if you do manage to leave the movement, it takes a long time to let go of what it did to you."

Melissa's shoulders sagged. "So I can't do anything until Megan either commits a crime, comes home on her own, or winds up hurt or dead somewhere?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that so I kept my mouth shut.

"That's total bullshit, K.C. That is total fucking bullshit."

"Megan's an adult."

"She's a hostage!"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Cults..." I paused, considering the ramifications of my words, decided to say it anyway. "They're like addictions."

She glared at me. "Megan's not using anymore."

"Hey, relax." I wanted to believe her. "One of the things many modern white supremacists espouse is absolutely no drug or alcohol use. So if Megan's with this crowd, chances are they're not allowing her access to anything. Which is a good thing because it keeps her from completely falling under their control. Think about it. Did you ever see Cody drinking?"

Melissa shook her head, realization in her eyes. "No. He always went for the Diet Coke."

"Did you see any names on the literature from Megan's apartment? Any group affiliations?"

"No. I was so disgusted and scared I didn't really read it."

"Did you save it?"

"Yes," she said with a *well, duh* tone. "I'm an attorney. It's evidence."

Before I could think about what I was saying, I said it anyway.

"Let me have a look at it." The relief in her eyes wouldn't allow me to change my mind. I kicked myself mentally from Grandpa's porch to Amarillo and back again.

"Thank you. It would mean so much to me. When can you come?" She leaned forward, hopeful.

"Um. Where? To Albuquerque?"

"That is where I live," she said snappishly.

"Whoa. Hold on. I don't think that's a good idea."

"How else are you going to see the stuff I found?"

Mail it? "Melissa..."

"You can stay at Megan's place," she continued. "I'm paying the rent and bills on it until..." She stopped and bit her lip.

I shook my head slowly. "Hold on. As much as I think it sucks what's going on with Megan, I don't know if I can help. Why don't you hire a private investigator?"

"I tried that," she said impatiently. "And most would have taken the case but they don't know anything about groups like this. I even tried contacting other people who research them and they all politely told me that it sounded like I needed the police or a PI."

I ran both hands through my hair, extremely uncomfortable with what she was asking of me. "Hey, I don't have any sort of affiliation with law enforcement. There's not a whole lot I can do. And besides, you're a lawyer. You deal with stuff like this all the time. Why can't you just—"

"Please, K.C.," she said, a slight sarcastic edge to her words. "Don't think I haven't considered that. It would make everything so much easier." I heard the unspoken "than having to deal with you." She looked at me, pleading. "You know Megan's history. You know *her*. She trusts you." Melissa watched me. "Remember what happened the last time?"

I did. Megan got strung out somewhere five years ago and Melissa didn't see her for a week. She hired a PI her firm used to track her down and he found her in some dive over in Albuquerque's War Zone. The police had to get involved because drug paraphernalia littered the apartment. Megan was arrested but Melissa managed to get her probation—Megan was a minor—and treatment.

"If Megan's caught up in something illegal, I might not be able to keep her out of prison this time." Melissa faltered and glanced away, clearing her throat.

"So you want to know exactly what she's doing with this guy," I said slowly, to make sure I understood what she wanted. "And you want it sort of 'unofficial.'"

Her gaze snapped back to mine. "Yes. If Megan is caught screwing up again, I have some decisions to make. I can either let it

go, as much as that hurts, or report it. As much as *that* hurts. But if she's not with him of her own volition, then I might be able to cut a deal with the DA if Cody's doing anything illegal that Megan's privy to."

I saw Melissa's point, but I felt extremely uneasy. "What about Chris? Did you call her? Or think about calling her?" I was reaching here, knowing almost instinctively she hadn't, because Chris would've called and told me if Melissa contacted her. Chris tells me pretty much everything, unless it's something that'll compromise her investigations with the Albuquerque Police Department.

Melissa's eyes clouded. "I didn't feel right doing that. Especially since I haven't talked to her since you left. Besides, she would have told me to talk to you, too."

She was right. *Shit.*

"You've worked with groups like this," she continued. "You've talked to people who are still part of them. You've gone to meetings with them. You *know* these people. Maybe you can figure out which group it is and what they might be planning to do." She leaned forward. "And Megan knows you. She likes you. She's always liked you. Maybe she'll come back on her own."

Dammit. I chewed my lip, trying to find an excuse, any plausible reason, to avoid this situation.

"Believe me," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "If there was any other way to do this, I would have."

I watched her as she looked down at the table. She looked like she was going to cry again.

"I would do anything to have someone else do this, but I trust you with Megan's past."

In spite of our own, I finished for her. I could hear a slight catch in her voice.

"I'll pay you."

I stared at her as if she had just offered to pay me for sex.

"No," she said, realizing how it must have sounded. "I mean as a researcher. I know you've done that in the past. I'll pay your going rate for research."

I continued to stare at her. She might as well have just slapped me.

"Plus room and board? Please. It would mean a lot to me. You could use it for your next book. You're doing research this fall semester, anyway."

My stomach lurched. "How did you know that?"

She looked away.

"How did you know that?" I said again. She had been tracking me and it bothered me. Why didn't she just call? *Because she knows it'd be harder to say no to her in person.* I clenched my teeth, feeling used.

She stood, slightly flustered. "I checked. I needed to know where I could find you."

"It's not on my Web site," I said, testing her.

"I called the department."

I stood as well and stared out at the fields. By the sun, it must have been almost three o'clock. Somewhere in the heat and haze I heard a tractor. And somewhere further away than that I heard the engine of Melissa's Toyota Camry as she drove out of my life and into someone else's sunset. *Don't burn your bridges*, I heard someone saying. *'Cause you might have to cross the river again.*

"On the off-chance—" I started, keeping my eyes on the field, "that there *was* some other way for you to do this, would you have done it?"

"Yes." No hesitation.

I shifted my full attention back to her. "What exactly does this entail?"

"So you'll do it?"

"I didn't say that. I want to know what it is you're expecting."

She went into professional mode. "I want to know who Cody is, what group he's with, what they're planning to do, and where they might be."

"And?"

"Once you get that figured out, I'll take the next step myself. If she really does want to leave and he's forcing her to stay, I'll get the proper authorities involved."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't want your money, Melissa."

"I'm hiring you to do research."

I wondered if Hillary had bought Melissa the same way she was trying to buy me. *Here ya go. Money'll fix it. I'll buy your heart and give you a new one.* A mouthful of bitterness accompanied my thoughts. *How much is your sister worth? How much am I worth?* I tugged my left earlobe, staring out across the fields again. "If I do this, I don't want your money," I said stubbornly.

"Will you at least let me provide the place to stay? And help with expenses?"

"If I do it." I sounded petulant.

"Thank you."

"I'm not sure. Let me think about it."

"Thanks for hearing me out." A faint smile lifted the edges of her mouth.

I nodded, feeling numb and cold inside, like I'd been left out in an early fall snow. The silence stretched between us until Melissa broke it when she opened the screen door. "Walk me to my car?" She raised her right eyebrow quizzically, almost playfully, like when she used to

flirt with me. I guess I could still fall for it because I examined the outline of her back as she pulled the screen door open and stepped into the kitchen. Even underneath the T-shirt, I could envision her wiry muscles plunging below the waistline of her shorts. I quickly glanced away. Misdirected lechery, I attempted to convince myself as I grabbed my hat and followed her through the house.

Grandpa rocked slowly on the front porch, his eyes closed. The heat of the day weighed heavily on him and the dogs. Barb and Dan gave Melissa only a cursory once-over as she stopped to say goodbye to Grandpa, thought better of it, and quietly descended the five steps.

I took my time putting my hat back on, waiting for her to slide into the driver's seat and shut the door, saving me from any inadvertent physical contact. Sinking my hands into my pockets, I maintained a respectful two-foot distance from the Lexus. She twisted in her seat and fumbled through something on the floor in back. She must have found what she wanted because she resumed appropriate driving posture and fastened her seatbelt before directing her attention at me. Automatically, I stepped closer.

"It's good to see you," she said with what sounded like genuine pleasure, though tinged with sadness. She was holding a business card and she wrote something on the back with a black pen. "I know you might think differently, but I'd like to maybe talk sometime."

I shrugged.

She handed me the business card. "I know you'll think about this. And I know you'll call me either way."

I took the card, glanced at it and shoved it into a front pocket of my jeans. She started the engine. It purred smoothly, powerfully.

"Nice rig," I said softly. "You must be doing okay."

She smiled and slipped her shades on before resting her right hand on the steering wheel. I heard Bonnie Raitt issuing from the vehicle's sound system.

"K.C.," Melissa said firmly, over Bonnie's voice, "no matter what you decide, I'm glad I saw you." She smiled and shook her head in a "well, hell" motion. "I used to think you were a damn good-looking woman, and I didn't think it could get any better." Even through her shades, I could see her eyes sweep over me, from the toes of my boots to my hat. "I was wrong." And she was backing up before I could retort.

Damn her. Damn ex-girlfriends in general. Dammit. I watched the Lexus until it turned left onto the main road, heatwaves swallowing the sound of its engine.

She was gone again, leaving me staring after her. I guess there were a few ghosts that needed to be put to rest. Out of habit, I glanced skyward. Evening was coming on. I had to finish with the alfalfa.

Chapter Two

MY EVENING RUN lasted longer than usual. When I returned to the house, darkness was forcing a reluctant sunset behind a gathering thunderstorm. Rain would be nice. Nights in the old house were nearly as oppressive as the days out of it. I thought I heard a quiet assurance from the distant clouds and I turned to study them. Grandpa's match scraped in the darkness behind me. He stood on the porch, leaning against the railing. The embers from his pipe glowed.

"I didn't see you," I said, searching the dark for his face. "I thought you'd be in bed by now."

I could almost hear him shrug. "A bit too hot yet."

I joined him on the porch, feeling a breeze ruffle the sweaty hair around my face. The breeze died as quickly as it had come. The evening felt stuffy. We might be in for some rain after all. "Luke'll be here in a few days. He's excited to be coming back."

Grandpa didn't reply, but I knew he liked the idea. Luke was his youngest and favorite grandson. I didn't mind my cousin, but he was a bit too Texas good ol' boy for my tastes. What was important was that he loved Grandpa and I knew that he'd take care of him.

"I'll be heading out in a couple of days," I said simply. I waited for him to say something. Instead, he nodded in the dark. I caught the motion because the embers in his pipe bowl bobbed.

"I asked Luke if he'd install an air conditioner for you. He'll pick one up at Home Depot and take care of that."

"Don't need it," he said in his gravelly baritone.

"Luke might. He gets used to it at school."

He didn't respond. I had let him off the hook with that and he didn't need to answer.

"I'll go check on the fences tomorrow," I added. I knew he needed to say something so I waited, perched on the railing.

"You going to call Melissa, then?"

I didn't say anything at first. We were a lot alike, he and I.

"Sounds like she needs some help."

"Yeah. It does." *What a sneak!*

"Long way to drive to ask you in person."

"Twelve hours, maybe." I picked at a splinter in the wood underneath my hand.

"She did you wrong," he said softly. I heard him take a pull on his pipe. He smoked tobacco that smelled like vanilla. "And she knows it."

Does she? Does she really? I stared up at the approaching storm, watching flashes of lightning in the roiling clouds.

"She made a mistake."

I looked at him, surprised. He couldn't see my expression in the dark. I tried to read the meaning between his words.

"Forgive and forget." He exhaled slowly and I caught a whiff of tobacco. "Or the past'll poison you."

I clenched my teeth.

"You'll do the right thing," he said. "Just remember who you are and where you came from. It'll get you by." It was the closest he would come to saying "take care of yourself," to saying that he was worried about me and please could I not get myself into a major loony-toon fuck-up situation.

"Yes, sir." He was old school and I often addressed him as such. I envisioned him smiling in the dark, looking up at the sky. I smelled the tinny, moist odor of rain. "C'mon," I urged him quietly. "Let's get in before it storms." Wordlessly, he entered the house ahead of me, Barb and Dan materializing simultaneously and darting around his legs into the parlor as the first discontented whispers of thunder caught my ear. I called Jane and Perry in and latched the screen door. I left the heavy inner door open, since Grandpa and I both liked to hear the rain. Lightning flashed in the distance, big electrical pogo sticks glancing off the plains, and I shivered. *God, I hope I do the right thing.*

THE MORNING ROLLED in on a stifling fog, residue of last night's monstrous storms. Leaving the house was like walking into a Swedish steam bath even this early. Muggy, moist, and threatening to get hotter. I hated days like these, when the sun swam in a thick, turgid sky and everything moved listlessly in a humid fishbowl.

Grandpa left the house at seven to check on a couple of fields. He'd said what he needed to say the night before and we both knew where we stood. Too bad every relationship couldn't be handled the same way. I went to saddle Ol' Jim up for today's fencing inspection. "Sorry, Jim," I muttered as I tightened the cinch and checked his bit. "We'll get done as fast as we can and come back."

He might have understood because he grunted softly. I swung into the saddle and coaxed him out into the heat, my legs already

sweating underneath my jeans. Dan and Perry decided to accompany us, though after a half-hour, they gave up and headed home. I ended up walking most of the fence lines, Jim following along. We stopped at every watering tank for both our benefits. I drank from the spigots and soaked a bandanna that I tied around my neck. Nothing out of the ordinary, though I ended up ratcheting a few strands of fencing tighter.

By one o'clock I had nearly finished with the last stretch. Jim munched on some nearby grass while I adjusted the tension on a lower strand. I had spent most of the morning thinking about Melissa and what she had asked me to do. I hadn't heard from her since the break-up, and all of a sudden, here she was. Still, Melissa was pretty diligent about things. If she felt there was any other way to deal with this situation, she would have done so. I was sure of that. And she didn't call me or try to e-mail me. She drove down and talked to me in person, even though we had ended on bad terms.

I pulled my gloves off and clicked my tongue at Jim. "Let's get the hell outta here, buddy." I climbed aboard and steered him toward home. He didn't need any extra urging. At the barn, I removed his saddle and blanket and rubbed him down as he munched on what Grandpa called "horse chow." I made sure the saddle was clean and wiped off before I slung it over the sawhorse in the corner and then I stood and watched Jim eat for a while.

If Megan was mixed up with white supremacists—and from what Melissa told me, it sounded like she was—what were the options? Megan was twenty-one. She could run with any group she wanted as long as she wasn't doing anything illegal. Melissa, however, suspected that this group was on its way to doing something scary. Well, so what? Why was it *my* problem? I wasn't involved with Melissa anymore. I didn't owe her a damn thing. Not after the shit she pulled with Hillary. I sat on a bale of alfalfa and absently chewed a stalk while I tiptoed through that corner of my mind.

My cell phone rang. I stood so I could pull it out of my pocket and check the number. "Hey, Detective Gutierrez," I answered, rolling the r's with extra inflection. "*¿Como estás, mi amiga bellissima?*"

Chris laughed. "*Esa*, you crack me up. Spanish and Italian in one sentence. What the hell do you call that?"

"Italish."

"That's why I keep you around. Ten years and counting. Jesus. You're my longest relationship."

I laughed. "Holy hell, you're right. That's *my* longest, too. Why don't we just get married?"

"What, and ruin a perfectly good friendship?" she countered, though the warmth in her voice was palpable.

"Good point. Promise me you'll reserve a spot on your porch for me and my rocking chair."

"And a pan of green chile lasagna." Before I could respond, she continued. "Got your message last night but got in too late to call you. What's up?"

I exhaled slowly, settling into a more serious mode. "Melissa showed up yesterday."

Long pause. "There? At your grandpa's?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell for?" She sounded more puzzled than pissed. Chris didn't have much love for Melissa after the break-up, but she never directly insulted her.

I dug the toe of my boot into a bale of straw. "Megan's gone missing and Melissa thinks she's with her boyfriend."

"And you're supposed to care because—?"

"Her boyfriend seems to be a neo-Nazi."

Chris didn't respond for a while. When she did, she was using her "just the facts, ma'am" tone. "And Melissa wants you to come back to Albuquerque to help her find Megan."

"And that's why you're the detective," I said dryly.

"So presumably in the discussion she outlined why no other course of action would work."

"She's pretty thorough, as you know."

Chris remained quiet, but I knew she was thinking that Melissa was using any excuse to contact me.

"It's been three years," I pointed out. "She didn't contact me before this. I don't think it's about hooking up again."

"I'll leave that to your judgment, *esa*. What are your feelings about it?"

I paused, watching Jim munch. What exactly *were* my feelings? "She needs some help. And it took a lot for her to come down here." Though she hadn't brought shit up when we were together toward the end. I sighed.

"True," Chris said, cautious. "So—"

"Yes. I'll be coming to Albuquerque." Voicing that sent a little jolt of longing down my back. Going home. That's what I was doing, essentially.

"When?"

I heard Chris's grin, which triggered one of my own. "I guess...really soon. A couple of days?"

"*Mi mujer favorita vuelve a casa*," Chris said, laughing. "This is some *good* news, Kase. Circumstances notwithstanding. I *knew* you'd come back."

"Your favorite woman?" I teased. "Really? And yeah, I suppose I am coming home in a lot of ways."

"Are you getting all mystical on me? Damn. I thought Texas might have baked that out of you by now."

"Yep. That's me. Mystic Chick. I'll go find my crystals and patchouli now." I rolled my eyes and stroked Jim's hide.

"Careful. Don't make fun of shit like that. *Abuelita* always says what you ridicule returns to haunt you."

I smiled. "I love your grandma. How is *Abuelita*, anyway?"

"She'll be much better now, after I call her and tell her that her favorite *gringita* is coming to town." Chris paused, then continued. "I am *so* excited to see you. It's been a while, *esa*."

"Don't get all excited just yet. I don't know what-all's involved here and I might not be in town too long."

"Oh, of course," Chris said with mock seriousness. "Nuevomexico is in your blood. I knew you'd come back."

"Chris, it's a visit."

"And isn't that how you ended up here in the first place?" she asked innocently. "Just checking out Albuquerque for grad school. Not sure you wanted to be here. Two days later, you'd found a place to live and accepted the department's offer."

I groaned. "All right, all right. But this is serious business and the last thing on my mind is moving back. I still have to finish out this damn post-doc, after all."

"Details," she retorted smugly. Then, "And fuck, I'm about to be really rude because I have to go put in some time *con la familia* and I'm late for dinner. Call me and tell me when you leave?" She voiced it as a question.

"Definitely. And say hi to your folks and your bros."

"Of course. Do you want to stay with me when you get here?"

"I'm not sure how that's going to work out. I'll probably end up at Megan's, since the shit I have to look at is there." I wasn't looking forward to that, either. Someone I considered a younger sister in a lot of ways, involved with racist crap. It made me kind of queasy.

"If you need a break from that, just go to my house."

"Will do. Thanks, *mujer*. I'll call you in a few."

"Damn right you will. *Buenas noches*."

"Yep. Catch you later." I hung up and thought a bit more about Melissa. She'd left me alone, like I asked. Until now. I sighed. "Jim, be glad you're a horse." He snorted. I watched my hand moving slowly over Jim's neck. I had the expertise to help Megan. She might not actually like me—God knows, her sister wasn't all that thrilled with me—and she might resent me for the rest of her natural-born life if I meddled. But I had knowledge that could help her. And not doing so did a disservice to her, the rest of her family, and to me. I thought about the researchers Melissa said she had contacted for advice. If it was true that they politely told her to go away, then why

the hell did they ever pursue their fields in the first place? Aren't those of us who get advanced degrees and have all this excess crap floating around in our heads supposed to use it in *and* out of the classroom?

I couldn't *not* do this. And no matter what had happened between me and Melissa, ultimately it was irrelevant. It was in the past. Megan was in the *now* and she probably needed help. I patted Jim one last time and went back to the main house. On the porch, I stood holding my cell phone, staring blankly at the business card in my other hand. "Melissa T. Crown, Esq.," it read. I turned it over and carefully punched the numbers she had written on my keypad.

She picked up after the first ring. "K.C.?"

I winced at the hope I heard in her voice. "Yeah, it's me." I gripped the railing on the front porch. "I'll do it."

She didn't say anything for a while but I heard her breathing. "Thank you," she finally whispered.

"I'll drive up day after tomorrow. Where does Megan live? I'll meet you there."

"Over behind the Monte Vista Firehouse."

"I'll call you when I get into town. Give me the address then."

"I can't begin to tell you —"

"Later," I interrupted. "I'll talk to you in a couple of days. I'll time it so I arrive after you're done at work."

"That doesn't matter. I'll meet you whenever you get here."

I nodded to myself, feeling a little pang. Why hadn't she extended herself to me like that three years ago? "Okay. I guess I'll see you in a couple of days. Bye." I hung up, not wanting to keep the channel open between us. I stood staring at nothing, listening to the hum of summer insects and the rustling of dogs on the porch. I missed some things about her, but I wasn't able to remember how it had been. When I tried to think about what had attracted me to her, it was always overridden by the shock and pain I felt seeing her with Hillary that night in the parking lot. That night that triggered my leaving. I thought about the first time Melissa and I made love but I couldn't remember quite how it happened. I threw a glance over at Jane and Dan.

"Am I still in love with her?" I asked them. Jane looked at me with an expression that I would have sworn was canine pity. No, I decided, I wasn't. I did need some kind of closure, though. Maybe later, Melissa and I would have that talk she mentioned. I sighed. I had some more phone calls to make.

K.C. Fontero must rescue her ex's sister from white supremacists.

Land of Entrapment

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