

CHAPTER 1

LAST NIGHT IN LA



When I closed my eyes, I could still see my last night at home in Los Angeles. It should have been perfect. And I blew it.

Dad had taken me and Alec, my little brother, onto the flat roof of his bungalow, like he did on cool summer nights. A chilly breeze rustled the palm trees on McCadden Avenue, and I shivered, even though it'd been a scorching day. The buzz of traffic on Sunset Boulevard two blocks north, and on Highland Avenue two blocks west, relaxed me. Dad set up his laptop to stream the Dodger game, and he brought us dinner from Poquito Mas on Cahuenga. The smell of burritos, the spotlights dancing around in the sky—from a movie premiere or something—it was all perfect.

Except I was ticked off. And Dad wouldn't put down his phone.

I looked at my burrito and smelled the fried eggplant and peppers. Delicious. I pushed it away.

Dad didn't notice. His phone made a blooping sound as a text came in. He started typing.

"You don't have to let us go, Dad," I said. I tried to keep my tone calm, even though I felt like throwing my burrito at him. "You could do something."

Alec had his carnitas burrito up to his mouth, about to take a huge bite. He put it down on its silver foil wrapper. "This again?" he said. "Tonight?"

"Tonight," I grumbled.

“What?” Dad looked up. He saw my face getting red and my untouched food. He saw Alec bracing himself for a storm.

“Are you done with the guacamole?” Dad said, grabbing a chip.

Typical Dad move. Typical cop move. Defuse whatever’s going on with something stupid and unrelated. *Not tonight, Dad.*

“I said you don’t have to let us go,” I said. “There’s got to be something you can do. A petition for the court, some sort of appeal. You could talk to Mom and bring her to her senses.”

“If he could bring Mom to her senses, she wouldn’t be going to Afghanistan,” Alec mumbled.

Dad shot him a glance, and Alec put his hands up in surrender. My brother picked up his burrito again. “Then again, what do I know?” he said.

“Kat,” Dad sighed. “We’ve been over this. When your mom and I split up, the court ruled that your mom gets most of the days. She gets to make decisions about things like this. I don’t like you guys being across the country, either. But the judge wasn’t wrong. Homicide cops don’t have stable home lives, and I can’t afford one of the good after-school programs or to hire someone.”

“I thought you cared about us,” I said. “Mom doesn’t. I thought you did.”

“Kat,” Dad said. His phone blooped again. He looked at the screen. “I have to answer this.”

“You have to answer. Mom has to go to a war zone,” I said. “Why’d you even have kids?”

“Kat, it’s our last night here,” Alec said. “Can you shut up and eat your burrito? Or give me your burrito and watch the game?”

“Nobody’s talking to you, Alec,” I said.

Dad stopped texting long enough to say, “Easy! No fighting on my roof tonight, or someone goes over the side.” Then he started texting again.

“What’s the difference?” I said. “I either go over the side and break something, or you ship me off to Grandpa Nick, who Mom hardly ever talks to, who I barely know.”

Dad didn’t stop typing while he talked. “Can you back off? It’s not the best situation, Kat. Your mom didn’t expect to get laid off. She felt she had to re-up with the army. I’m sorry I’m slammed. This doesn’t have to be forever.”

“It’ll feel like forever. Grandpa Nick might be nuts. He lived in Chicago his whole life, and now suddenly, he ups and moves to some town in Michigan. Have you ever even heard of Crabtree?”

Before Dad could respond—or possibly stop typing—Alec interrupted. “That reminds me,” he said, mouth full. “I thought of a nickname for where we’re going. You say Crabtree. I say, more like Crap-tree. Get it? Crap-tree?”

I glared at him. His stupid sense of humor was no good here.

Dad chuckled. That made it worse. “Kind of obvious,” he said. “Think you can come up with a better one by the time you get there?” He went back to typing.

Enough was enough. I was done competing with whoever he was texting. *Eyes on your kids, Dad!* I smacked the phone out of his hand.

I’d meant for the phone to fall from his hands onto the shingles next to us. It’d be enough of a spectacle to get his attention.

But I hit his hand too hard. Like, way too hard.

“Holy crap!” Alec yelled.

Exactly. Holy crap!

The phone flew out of his hand in a perfect arc. Alec ducked, and it missed his head by a few inches. I chased after it, like maybe I could catch it.

No luck.

I got to the edge of the roof just in time to watch it drop.

It sunk out of sight. My stomach lurched.

After what seemed like a year, I heard it hit the ground with a loud smack. Maybe a crunch, too. *Oh God, I didn't mean to hit that hard.*

I really didn't want to pay for the phone. I shouldn't have slapped it. My throat felt dry. I couldn't breathe.

"Why'd you do that?" Alec yelled. Like it was planned.

"Kat!" Dad said, his voice raised. "What were you thinking?"

Just like that, all my guilt disappeared. Dad was ticked off? Good!

Alec skittered to the edge of the roof and looked down. "I think you killed it."

Dad followed. "What were you thinking?!" he repeated.

That cemented it. What was I thinking? This was war. I came out shouting.

"You get one more night with your kids, and you can't even look up from your phone!" I yelled. "Tomorrow, Mom drives us across the country, drops us, and disappears. And you can't stop texting."

"You've got to be kidding me," Dad came back at me. "I'm knee deep in a murder case. Next week, I'm a key witness in a case that could set a really bad guy free. Don't you ever think of anyone but yourself?"

"That's it!" I said, stomping away. "Thanks for the great last night at home, Dad."

"Kat," Alec said. He was already trying to calm things down. It wasn't working.

Before I climbed down from the roof, I launched a final attack. "You're right, Dad. I'm the selfish one. Two people get married and have kids. They can't stay together, and their jobs don't fit for a family. So they ship the kids to some creepy little town in Michigan. I'm thirteen, and I'm on my own now—not to mention

responsible for the ten-year-old joke machine over there. But I'm the one who's selfish! See if your keen detective mind can figure out who the real selfish jerks are!"

I climbed off the roof. It wasn't quite the mic drop moment I wanted. Dad had his old wooden ladder leaning against the backside of the bungalow. I'd gone up and down the ladder to hang out on the roof more times than I could count, and since I was six. But it still required me turning around, awkwardly stepping onto a rung and grabbing hold of the sides as I went down. I couldn't even really turn my back on Dad and Alec.

So it wasn't a slamming door, or something cool like that. But once my head was below roof level, it was almost like stomping off. I think I made it work. Sort of.

I heard Dad and Alec calling after me. I ignored them. I went in the back door of the bungalow, through the kitchen, and straight to my room. I slammed the door and slumped on my bed. I started crying, but I held my breath. Those two were not going to hear me sobbing.

My room wasn't even my room anymore. My things were boxed up by the door. The sheets were off the bed. I buried my head in my remaining pillow.

A few minutes later, a gentle knock came at the door. Dad.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry, Kat. I should've ignored my phone till you guys were in bed. You were right about that."

I was right about everything, Dad. Your apology's way too late.

So I didn't answer.

"Moving to the Midwest doesn't have to be all bad," he tried. "Remember how I used to tell you cop stories before bed when you were a kid? Bank jobs, drug busts, stuff like that? It's not like there aren't great crime stories back there. You're going to be an hour from Chicago. Home of Al Capone. John Dillinger."

Nice try. Capone and Dillinger died like a hundred years ago. I'm going to Crap-tree in the present. Was he this stupid? All I wanted him to do was try to keep us here.

Did he even want to?

“Any chance you’re coming out anytime soon, Katty?”

I didn’t answer. *No chance, Dad.*

At that point, I thought he was the one who’d blown it. The next morning, when I was an hour outside LA, I wished I’d gotten up and opened the door.

Instead, I heard him walk away. Probably to get back to texting.

A few minutes later, there was another knock. This one louder, no rhythm. Alec.

“You asleep?”

I didn’t answer. Maybe if he wasn’t around, Dad would want to keep me in town. Maybe Alec was the problem.

“I just wanted to congratulate you,” he said. “I thought nothing could wreck the night Dad had planned. I thought it was unwreckable. But nobody wrecks things like Kat Dylan.”

I almost got up. So I could go to the door, open it, throttle him, and go back to bed.

Before I could, he said, “Also, I ate your burrito. Good night.”

I lay back on the bed. On top of everything else, I was hungry.