



*Monday*  
*November 11*  
*2:00 p.m.*

*Jess*

“**J**ess, this isn’t smart.” My best friend, Grace, is breathless as she tries to keep up with me. I shorten my steps, realizing my attempt at a casual stroll has morphed into a power walk.

“You’re right,” I agree. “I was walking too fast. We need to act normal, to avoid suspicion.” Several college students are approaching on the sidewalk, and I grab Grace’s arm, throw my head back, and laugh like she’s said something hysterically funny.

To her credit, Grace goes along with the fake joke until the students pass, then abruptly stops laughing. “Yep, not suspicious at all.” Her tone implies an eye roll. “I meant, it’s not a good idea to be here, on this campus. Nick needs to investigate. He’s the deputy sheriff, after all.”

“*Hmm*,” I answer, which translates into, “I hear you, but I’m ignoring your advice.”

“You’re ignoring my advice, aren’t you?” Grace asks.

“*Hmm.*”

“Well, at least I can tell everyone I tried.” The resignation in her sigh tugs at my conscience, and I try to reassure her. I’ve been eager to search for Sierra and am relieved that today is Veteran’s Day and there’s no school.

“It’s just a little intelligence gathering. Sierra called Nick on Saturday and claimed someone had taken her. When he went to Missoula to search, he found out the police and FBI are investigating a trafficking ring operating near the campus. He can’t be certain traffickers took Sierra, but it’s a place to start.”

“I’m confused,” Grace says. “Why are we looking for clues in Dillon if Sierra is attending the University of Montana in Missoula?”

“Nick says Sierra volunteers at the Youth Challenge Program here at Montana Western twice a month. Her Missoula roommate, Gwen, thinks that’s where she was going Friday afternoon. Sierra always stays on campus here with her friend Naomi when she’s in Dillon.”

“Sierra has a big heart if she volunteers two weekends a month to help at-risk kids,” Grace says. “But you said she was skipping trips home and not answering calls. Why would she pull away from her family and friends?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “Let’s find her and ask.”

As we turn a corner, a large brick building looms in front of us. I infuse my tone with surprise. “Hey, look. Magnus Hall. Naomi lives here.”

“Shocking.”

I frown at Grace’s tone. While sarcasm is pretty much my default setting, Grace is very trusting and sweet. But over the past few months, my “adventures,” as I call them, have sharpened Grace’s edges more than a little. Great, I’ve broken my best friend.

“C’mon.” Grace’s genuine smile eases my conscience. “Let’s check if Naomi is around.”

I shake my head. “She’s in Justice, being interviewed by Nick and Levi.”

“How’d you know that?” Grace asks, then she laughs. “Never mind, stupid question.”

“There are no stupid questions,” I quote our French teacher, Madame Fellini.

Grace finishes the quote with a grin. “Only stupid accents.”

For a moment I consider looking around Naomi’s dorm room for any clues about Sierra but dismiss the idea. Normally, my philosophy is, ‘what’s a little B and E between friends.’ But I’ve only met Naomi once and I’m not sure our relationship has reached that level yet.

“C’mon.” I tug Grace’s arm and turn us back toward the student parking lot, where I parked my sister’s car. “I was wrong to think we’d find Sierra on campus. She claimed someone grabbed her. Maybe she’s in another state by now.” I’m surprised when my voice cracks with those last words.

We climb into Sly’s Honda and sit in silence for a minute, then Grace says, “I’m scared.”

“Me too.”

“Does Nick have any clues at all?” Desperation laces her words.

Deputy Sheriff Nick McBride is Sierra’s cousin, and the one she called Saturday. He’s also Sly’s boyfriend, while his younger brother, Cole, is my boyfriend. I guess we like to keep things in the family.

Sierra had called Nick during a family gathering, which included the entire McBride and Thomas clans. Well, the McBrides are a clan. Sly, Maggie, and I are more of a three-sister clan-ette.

“Not really,” I say. “Tomorrow, Nick and Levi are joining the task force in Missoula that’s focused on finding the traffickers. Hopefully, they will have some new information that will bring Sierra home.”

When I consider what Sierra is facing, my throat tightens.

She must be terrified. I whisper the same prayer I've repeated many times since she called Nick three nights ago. "Please, God, keep Sierra safe and bring her home soon."

I glance at Grace and see tears trickling through the freckles that dust her cheeks.

"Hey." I touch her arm. "God's got this. We have to trust Him."

Grace swipes at the tears and nods.

"Since we're in Dillon, let's stop and see Verity," I suggest, hoping to lighten our moods.

"I'd like that." Grace says.

I turn the car toward downtown Dillon to Verity's shop. Last month, Grace took me to the specialty shop to find accessories for our homecoming outfits. It surprised me to discover that Verity and my mom had been friends.

Since my parents' murder a year ago, I treasure every memory of them. When Verity shared some conversations they'd had, I felt like Mom was with us, just for a few minutes.

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THE BELL over Verity's door announces our arrival, and I stop to inhale the unique scent of the store. The fragrant tang of apple cider, mixed with the spicy aroma of freshly baked snickerdoodle cookies, smells delicious.

Verity stands behind the antique table that serves as a sales counter. At the tinkling of the bell, she looks up and gives us a dazzling smile. She nods toward a table holding the treats even as she speaks with two women standing at the counter.

"Yes, the ghost town of Bannack is a fascinating place, especially if you like history. I'm sorry that it's closed for the season. Maybe you can visit in the spring."

The women have a variety of items laid out on the table, but I'm not clear if they are buying or selling. I nudge Grace, and we head over to the cookie table to wait until Verity is free.

“Oh man,” Grace mumbles around a mouthful of cookie. “These are amazing.”

I lift the lid of the small slow cooker and ladle hot apple cider into two paper cups, then hand one to Grace. She takes a sip, and her eyes widen.

“Delicious and ... spicy?” She peers into the cup. “What do you think she added to the cider?”

I taste it and grin. “Red Hots. That’s how Mamma used to make cider too.”

I sip again, close my eyes, and for a moment, I hear Mamma and Daddy in our kitchen discussing how many Red Hots to put in the cider.

“Brian,” Mamma said, “The recipe calls for one cup of Red Hots, not one entire bag.”

“If some is good, more is better.” Daddy reached around her and tried to pour more of the spicy candy into the large pot on the stove.

I smile, remembering how Mamma waved her wooden spoon at him, shooing him away. Daddy retreated, only to swoop back, kiss Mamma on the cheek, and drop a handful of candy into the pot.

The sound of raised voices interrupts my tender memory.

“Uh-oh,” Grace whispers. “Sounds like Verity is having some trouble.”

“It’s worth a lot more than that!” The duo at the counter have added additional items to the pile they’re trying to sell to Verity. “See how it shines? It could be pure gold.”

Grace and I approach as Verity pulls a large magnet from a drawer.

“Let’s check,” she says with a tight smile. She picks up the gold-colored ring, and it clings to the magnet.

“I’m sorry,” Verity says, kind but firm. “Gold is not magnetic, so this piece is gold-plated. It’s a pretty ring, and I’m certain I can resell it, but I’ll only pay the price I quoted.”

I study the items the women have displayed. Most are

costume jewelry, and I assume Verity won't buy them for resale in her store.

The older woman is wearing skinny jeans and a leopard print jacket. She has what Sly calls 'big hair,' and as I get closer, her heavy perfume takes my breath away. She scoops up the items and stuffs them into a backpack with more force than necessary.

"Wait." The younger woman says. "Here's something." She reaches into the pocket of her baggy jeans and pulls out a necklace and reverently lays it down.

We press closer. Attached to a delicate gold chain is a single, vertical gold bar. A topaz stone glitters near the bottom of the bar, with the initial *S* engraved in the middle.

"That is lovely," Verity says. "But are you sure you want to sell such a personal piece?"

Leopard Woman gasps, then turns it into a cough. "Honestly ... Susie," the woman stammers. "Put that away. There's no need for you to sell your favorite necklace." She plucks up the necklace and stuffs it into her backpack with the other jewelry. Then she grabs Susie by the arm and sweeps her toward the exit.

"Susie," I call out, but both women keep moving. "Susie!"

Leopard Woman stops and nudges Susie, who slowly turns.

"Happy birthday," I say with what I hope appears to be a genuine smile.

Her forehead scrunches in confusion. "What?"

"Well, happy birthday month," I explain.

Susie shakes her head, "My birthday is in July."

Leopard Woman drags her through the door and onto the sidewalk. I follow them, ignoring the still tinkling bell. They hustle down the sidewalk, jump into a dirty brown SUV, and race off.

I hurry back into the shop, repeating a series of letters and numbers. Verity and Grace stare at me.

"Verity, do you have a pen and paper?" I ask breathlessly.

Without a word, Verity produces them, and I write the

identification I memorized from the license plate. Finally, I take a deep breath. “I need to call Nick.”

“Jess, what’s going on?” Verity asks. “Did you know those women?”

“No. But if that girl’s name is Susie, I’m Taylor Swift. She said her birthday is in July, which has a ruby for the birthstone. The topaz stone is for November.”

I pull out my phone and speed-dial Nick’s number.

“I’ve seen that necklace before,” I say. “It belongs to Sierra.”