

Sabrina Blaum

# A Question of Courage



# Chapter 1

## *Twilight Echoes*

Kat Johnson suppressed a yawn the moment Ron called cut.

"That's it. Thank you, ladies," Ron said.

She might have to increase her caffeine intake, judging by the cobwebs still fogging her mind. Kat offered a small smile and a nod at Tania Smith—her name was as bland as her performance.

"Thank you for the opportunity," Tania said, her tone smooth but devoid of warmth.

Kat shouldn't be so harsh.

Going by Ron's and Darla's drooping eyelids, the chemistry read with the third actress being considered as her new co-star on *Broken Time* had probably felt like watching paint dry, but it wasn't the woman's fault. Her acting had been technically flawless, but sometimes actors just didn't click.

"Thank you, Ms. Smith. You'll hear from us later this week," Ron said, dismissing the actress.

She left the audition room without another word.

"Are we done for today?" Kat half-rose, already picturing herself at home, filling up her tub and—

"No, there's one more actress. She was delayed in traffic, but she should be here any moment," Darla said.

With a small sigh, Kat leaned back in her chair.

Ron gave a dry laugh. "Aren't people supposed to get more patient with age?"

"I don't know; are they, Ron?" Kat asked, offering a sweet smile followed by a glare. She wished Ron understood sarcasm—and even more that she were home, that this whole new-partner nonsense wasn't necessary.

There was a knock, then the door opened.

"I'm so sorry about the delay," a clear voice said.

Kat froze. It was a voice that didn't belong this close to her.

Her gaze snapped to the door, and at the sight of the woman, her brain lagged, much like a buffering dial-up connection. For a split second, Kat thought she even saw the accompanying circle spinning in front of her eyes.

"No worries," Ron said, sitting straighter in his seat across from Kat. "It's not always the first squirrel that catches the acorn."

Darla snorted, while the actress—*Hannah*—canted her head.

Kat's heart torpedoeed against her chest, an impact resonating in every limb. She rubbed her clammy hands against her pants legs. Perhaps she was dreaming? The apparition of—

"All right. This is Hannah Laine, Kat. Ms. Laine, I'm assuming you're familiar with Kat Johnson?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. Let's get started. Please get into the marked positions."

Hannah stepped toward the lines on the floor in front of the table, while Kat showed no reaction.

"Kat?" Darla said.

Shaking her head, Kat forced herself to stand. Every cell in her body shouted at her to walk out, but she moved to her mark.

"All right, you both have the pages," Ron said. "Let's take it from the top." He turned on the camera sitting on the conference table. "Go."

"Lisa, we can't do this! It's too risky!" Hannah opened the scene, her intense blue eyes holding a flicker of worry, tension tightening her features.

Kat swallowed hard, mesmerized, still struggling to catch her bearings. She straightened. "There's no other choice," she rasped, still caught in Hannah's gaze. Only her decades of experience and the familiarity with her character enabled her to pull through.



The rest of the read blurred past like a fever dream. Kat acted on instinct, torn between the surreal sensation of talking to Hannah again and the need to escape her. Time that had dragged like wet cement with Tania slipped through her fingers like quicksand with Hannah. Before she knew it, Ron called "cut" again.

A trembling breath left Kat, who was still trapped in Hannah's orbit. Hannah resembled a satellite, equally drawn to Kat.

"Uh, that's..." Darla cleared her throat.

"Yes. We're done here," Ron said, sounding as dazed as Kat felt.

Kat blinked furiously and shifted, finally taking in Darla and Ron again. Why did *they* look so stunned? They could hardly know, and surely their acting hadn't been *that* terrible.

The two of them stepped back, conferring in hushed tones for what felt like an eternity. She couldn't look at Hannah, and the woman just remained standing where she was, statuesque, seemingly unperturbed by anything.

A minute? Five minutes went by? Who could even tell at this point?

Finally, Ron and Darla split apart and faced them again.

"We found our Carla! Congratulations, Hannah! This was a spectacular read." Ron practically glowed.

"Yes, the chemistry between you two is off the charts! I'm impressed." Darla smiled. "Ron was sure you were a good fit, and I'm glad he was right."

"Wait, what?" Kat said. This meant... No! She couldn't... How was she supposed to handle Hannah as her main costar every day for months? Years, potentially!

"Thank you. I'm happy to hear you enjoyed my performance. I've been super excited about the prospect of joining *Broken Time*. I've been an avid watcher since day one."

*Putting it on thick much?* This didn't sound like the Hannah she'd met.

"That works out even better, so you know all about Kat's character. You two should probably also get to know each other a bit. I'm sure Elaine—she plays the agency supervisor, Allison—will throw one of her parties again soon. It's always good for cast cohesion, and as the new kid in the market square, you'll be the center of attention," Ron said.

A flicker of unease crossed Hannah's face, but it vanished in an instant—erased with eerie precision as her features slipped back into a too-perfect mask that grated on Kat's nerves.

"That sounds like a marvelous idea. I'm excited to meet the cast," Hannah clasped her hands behind her back.

Kat could only shake her head. *That's some real Twilight Zone shit.*

After another round of pleasantries, Hannah offered them all that weird, plastic smile and a nod before walking out the door.

Kat lingered. She should leave too—hell, earlier she couldn't wait to get out of here. She should pretend this wasn't happening. But when had that approach done her any good? Never mind, her feet stayed rooted to the floor.

Oh, she knew this was futile, but she had to try. She turned to Ron and Darla.

"You can't be serious. Laine is way too young. She seems raw, untrained. Tania Smith had a much better technique."

Darla exchanged a quick glance with Ron, her brows lifting.

"Is this a joke?" Ron asked.

"No! I don't think Laine fits in. She's... weird. Standoffish. She just stood there half the time. And the way she talked—"

"We want the best actors for the roles, people who gel on the screen, and the two of you were amazing," Darla said.

Ron waved her off. "She's a bit formal, yeah, but that could just be nerves. And there's no way we're hiring Smith. She's not bad, but the two of you together stink."

"Wow. OK, but the age—"

"She's not that young," Darla said.

Kat scoffed. "She looks it."

"What? Are you worried she'll make you look old next to her?" Ron asked.

Darla elbowed him.

"What?"

"Forget it," Kat said through clenched teeth. "I'm heading out."



By the time Kat made it home, it was already past five. She still felt too hot and restless, and her head was pounding. Being stuck in stop-and-go traffic for almost an hour hadn't done her mood any favors.

She had planned a relaxing yoga routine, a long bath, and then curling up in bed with a glass of wine and a new book she'd been excited to read. Now, though, her energy level called more for a HIIT workout (which she hated with a passion), a kickboxing session (which would probably leave her with a pulled muscle), an ice-cold shower (she wasn't masochistic

enough), or falling face-down on her bed after downing half a bottle of vodka (she was too old for that).

Kat paced her living room. She contemplated calling Liz—her best friend should be home—but she didn’t want to intrude, souring a potentially relaxing evening with Claudia and their adorable little Alice with her rancid mood.

“Fucking hell,” she cursed when she stubbed her toe against her coffee table. *Of all the things!*

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She could do this. She would make it work.

Or maybe there *was* a way out after all. Kat just needed to figure out the best way to die.

Her character’s death would not only eliminate her current nightmare, but it might even free her from her growing discontent. An accident during a transport back in time? Perhaps some rogue agent trying to hijack the time machine for nefarious purposes? She could pitch it to Darla—after all, as the head writer of *Broken Time* she could surely arrange that. A tragic sendoff for the resolute time travel agent, Lisa Darnell.

Too bad Kat was still under contract for another two years.

Besides, she really liked her character. She liked the show, too—even if it had gotten a bit stale lately. Not that the show was the issue.

With a sigh, Kat recalled her mother’s old admonishment: *Never employ a permanent solution to a temporary problem.*

Yes, yes. She’d figure this out. She’d find a way to put this specter to rest—to silence the echo before it became a permanent ringing in her ears. She already had enough sleepless nights. No need to offer insomnia more chances to rest at her side.



One week. That was how long Kat’s reprieve lasted before Hannah Laine invaded their set.

Kat, caught in mid conversation with Elaine and Reeve, struggled to smooth her features into nonchalance when Hannah strode into the room. No longer a ghost from the past but a living, breathing part of Kat’s world—still achingly beautiful, still impossible to ignore.

"Oh, wow. That's so sweet of you." Elaine accepted the huge box of chocolates Hannah handed her. "We'll be sure to devour them."

Kat could only stare. Chocolates. Who brought chocolate onto a film set that usually included too many starving actresses?

"You're very welcome." Hannah straightened, her hands again folded behind her back. Her voice was pleasant, but her tone rang as stiff as her posture.

"Are you excited to be here? The role of Kat's partner will give you a lot of screen time, but you'll also have to deal with Kat here." Elaine bumped into Kat, who barely managed a smile.

"Yeah, good old Kat gave Tim a run for his money," Reeve added.

"I'm looking forward to working with all of you. You are an accomplished group of actors." Hannah smiled—still the same plastic expression.

What had happened to the captivating smile that—no, Kat would not go there.

"Oh, flattery will get you everywhere." Elaine laughed. "We're happy to have you. It sucked to lose Tim, but he couldn't refuse such a big role."

Kat hummed. She hated that Tim had had to leave, though she understood.

A glint of silver at Hannah's neck drew her gaze—a phoenix. Kat shivered as a torrent of memories threatened to surge through her.

"I'm sure. It's a great opportunity for him." Hannah still hadn't shifted, standing there as rigid as a board while her face was all smiles, but not her eyes—they looked weary.

"Come on, let's introduce you to the rest of the cast, or, at least, those who are here today."

"That would be lovely, thank you, Elaine."

Kat suppressed an eye roll. Hannah made her tense, almost like the cold did—this involuntary tightening of all your muscles that, even when you try, you can't relax. Had Hannah really changed so much in two years? Perhaps the woman Kat had met back then was the lie.

"Kat, you coming?"

"Sure." Kat allowed Elaine to drag her out of her memories and followed along, remaining silent and letting everyone else do the talking. Hanging back and observing was better for now. She folded her arms across her chest as she leaned against the wall. This definitely *wasn't* the woman with whom she'd shared the most beguiling conversation two years ago.

"The rest of the season is exciting. There are some dramatic moments ahead of us," Elaine was saying.

"That is always a pleasant challenge." Hannah nodded.

"Have you watched the show before?"

"Yes. I've watched from day one—avidly."

Kat brows furrowed. That was almost the same line she'd given Ron during their chemistry read.

"Good, good. It's always harder when a newbie hasn't got a clue about the show."

Hannah nodded, still wearing a painted-on smile that showed too many teeth and never reached her eyes.

Later on, with the others lost in conversation, Hannah addressed Kat. "You've said little. Are you very sad to see Tim go?"

"We were a good team," Kat acknowledged.

"Perhaps we will make one, too."

"Stranger things, I suppose."

Kat held Hannah's gaze for another beat, waiting for something—recognition, hesitation, anything. But Hannah's expression remained unreadable, bland.

Enough.

"Excuse me." Kat turned on her heel. She walked away, forcing herself not to look back while ignoring the heavy feeling settling within her. If Hannah had forgotten her, well, then Kat could do the same.



## Chapter 2

### *Busted Expectations*

Hannah emitted a high-pitched curse as she slid on cat vomit while carrying an overstuffed laundry basket. Unable to break her fall, she crashed down on her ass, tipping the basket over and spilling clean clothes onto the floor.

“Bandit! You asshole!” Hannah shouted, rubbing her sore right wrist.

She rose with a groan and picked her clothes off the floor, grimacing when she touched a wet shirt. “Ugh. Nice going, dude.”

Hannah rewashed her clothes before mopping up the rest of the mess. Life with cats, she supposed. She’d never want to live without one, but her day—or rather, her entire week—had been stressful enough. Her little chocolate-spotted tabby didn’t have to add to her laundry list of disasters, *literally*. Now, he was hiding, of course.

She had joined the set of *Broken Time* the previous week, and her welcome had been... adequate. She often wasn’t sure what to expect from people, and while she rarely connected with anyone, she’d learned to tolerate most—at least whenever she had no other choice. In her own four walls, though, she tolerated no one, which meant she spent most of her time with Bandit.

She had almost been excited about *Broken Time*—not only because it was a step in the right direction, but also because she had looked forward to working with Kathryn Johnson, or Kat, as most people called her. Hannah never understood why anyone would shorten such a lovely name.

Too bad the Kathryn she’d encountered on set had turned out to be cold and distant. That hadn’t been her impression of the formidable actress, but it wouldn’t be the first time Hannah had gotten it wrong.



When Hannah arrived on set the next morning at quarter to five (having to be at work so early remained the only thing she'd change about her career), Kathryn was already there, offering Hannah only a curt nod when she sat in the other makeup chair across the station. The remaining cast members trickled in closer to five, and they were chatting amongst themselves while going through makeup and style.

Elaine Finton was talking about her grandchildren's antics the previous weekend. Her voice, launching into a story about her grandson, cut through Hannah's internal monologue.

A practiced smile flickered on Hannah's face, and she offered polite questions while her mind already calculated the fastest escape route. Children, with their boundless energy and unpredictable emotions, were a social minefield she preferred to avoid. She would rather focus on her craft—television, film, and performance.

Hannah consumed entertainment almost obsessively. It was a solitary pursuit, but it allowed her to study people—an effort to understand them that still too often eluded her. The cinematic arts had been her master class—years spent perfecting expressions, mannerisms, emotions. It was all just another performance.

Her gaze swept through the room, critically analyzing the physical appeal of her colleagues. In terms of looks, they were an above-average group. Again, expected and not inherently an issue.

Kathryn Johnson was objectively a striking woman—an athletic figure, shoulder-length auburn hair, eyes that shifted between blue and gray, depending on the light.

"Oh, Hannah. Has anyone told you the story of how my grandson is responsible for Kat's new haircut by the end of season two?"

"Oh?" Hannah's curiosity was roused. Kathryn used to have long hair on the show, and she'd seen many hairstyle changes during the first two years. Most featured some severe version of a tight bun. However, in the middle of a two-part episode, she'd suddenly showcased a new style—a bit too long to be called a bob, but not by much. It suited her. There had been some kind of in-show explanation Hannah no longer recalled.

Kathryn groaned. "Really? That old tale, Elaine?"

"Well, your future partner should know about all the ins and outs of Lisa's life, no?"

Kathryn looked at her for a moment, unreadable, but neither of them said a word, and so Elaine continued the tale of how her grandson Stryder had forced Kathryn's hair change—a cookout, an artistic husband, inquisitive little hands reaching for what they shouldn't, and a paper hat with a glob of super glue later and Kathryn's hair was ruined.

Yet, neither blamed the boy.

"I was getting quite exasperated with the constant changes. So perhaps Stryder had an inkling and helped me out," Kathryn said.

Hannah wrinkled her nose. "Wait—so Stryder is praised but Hank gets reprimanded?" The child was at fault, and six surely was old enough to know not to touch super glue. They should have chastised him, too.

"Of course. Hank's the adult after all. Besides, Stryder's way cuter than Hank."

"Don't let your husband hear that." Kathryn let out a rough laugh.

Hannah nodded and smiled. People were so strange. She still didn't get how cuteness factored into personal accountability, but, apparently, that was how the world worked. Then again, Bandit got away with everything because he was cute. But he was a cat.

Later, while waiting for the call to start her first scene, Jackson settled down next to her.

"How are you settling in?" he asked.

Hannah smiled. "It's a change from my last project, but so far, things seem to be going splendidly."

"Good, good." He looked around the room, his gaze seeming to linger on Kathryn chatting with Reeve in the back. "Listen, I know it's never easy to join an established cast, and so... Don't let them give you a hard time, OK?"

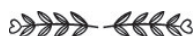
Hannah arched a brow.

Jackson laughed under his breath. "You know, the new kid at school, kinda? It's easy to end up staying on the outside if you let them push you there."

"Shouldn't the onus be on the ones *doing* the pushing, not the one being pushed? Besides, adults aren't children," Hannah said.

"Of course not. And, yes, you're right, but that's not how it works, is it?" He rose. "Anyway, see you around."

Hannah's gaze lingered on his retreating figure as she mulled over his words, still coming up mostly empty.



By mid-morning, they were shooting a scene where Kathryn's character showed her new partner the lab with the time machine. Ron had to keep stopping them because Kathryn displayed the wrong emotions.

"Kat, come on! Yes, Lisa is frustrated at getting a new partner, but she still wants to give Carla a chance. Don't be so harsh on the poor girl."

Kathryn rolled her eyes. "Don't you think Lisa would be more than frustrated? She didn't want Paul to leave, and instead of getting assigned someone who has already worked with her, this new person comes in, fresh out of college and —"

"Carla isn't that young," Hannah voiced, speaking up for the first time all afternoon.

Kathryn turned toward Hannah. "Well, she's significantly younger than Lisa or Paul."

"Maybe someone new and younger can offer a fresh perspective on things."

"Exactly," Ron interjected. "Good point, thank you." He beamed at her with the type of smile that often made Hannah suppress the impulse to take a step back.

Ron shifted his gaze back to Kathryn, who was busy glaring at the floor. "Work with that energy, Kat. You're not convinced this will work, but you're open to being surprised."

Kathryn muttered something under her breath Hannah didn't catch, but she doubted it was complimentary to her or Ron.

"Let's start from the beginning," Ron called out, and they all got into positions.

And so it continued. It took *fifteen* takes to get the scene right, and by the end, Hannah wasn't sure if the pounding in her skull came from exhaustion or from the longing to shout at one Kathryn Johnson. If this was how she wanted to play it, Hannah's tenure at *Broken Time* would shape up to be a nightmare.

But she'd tough it out. There was no way Kathryn—or anyone else—would make her quit. Plenty of costars despised each other and still delivered iconic performances.

Their screen test had proven they had *something*.

# *Interlude 1*

## *An Unforeseen Delight*

*Two years earlier*

The ballroom swirled with colors and sounds. The broad skylight revealed a full moon and twinkling stars above, while old-fashioned, crystal chandeliers spilled a kaleidoscope of light on the masked figures below.

The masquerade ball had been organized to celebrate the release of a new movie, and it showed—everything sparkled with curated excess.

Laughter and fragmented conversations wrapped around Kat like mist, blending into the hypnotic orchestral tune. A hazy scent of lilies and exotic spices filled the air, clashing against the cool bite of marble beneath her feet. Behind her silver mask, a sense of anonymity unfurled, granting Kat a freedom she hadn't tasted in years. It had been ages since she last attended such an event, much preferring more controlled and planned encounters.

As she moved through the swarm of dancers, laughing and enjoying themselves, a flash of scarlet feathers caught her eye—a bejeweled mask shaped like a phoenix.

The woman wearing it moved with effortless poise and drew admiring glances from all directions. Their eyes met, and the stranger tilted her head.

Kat hesitated. She hadn't come here to meet anyone, and normally she'd steer clear of this kind of scene. But something in the woman's gaze—steadfast, curious—tugged at her. Intrigued, and with excitement vibrating in her veins, Kat followed the unknown beauty to a secluded corner.

One moment, they were exchanging pleasantries, and before she knew it, they were deep in a philosophical discussion.

"I've always been fascinated by Maria Mitchell, how astronomy shaped her view of the universe. When I was a child, I discovered this rickety,

abandoned barn in the middle of a large field." The woman smiled softly. "It was probably hazardous and dangerous, but I loved lying on the roof and gazing at the stars. It made me feel so small yet somehow not alone? That likely doesn't make any sense." She lowered her head.

"It does, actually. The stars are so far away, many of them only echoes, but from where you're sitting, they're gigantic. They offer light in the dark—solace, almost."

"Exactly."

A pleased expression flickered across the woman's face, filling Kat's chest with unexpected warmth.

"Being alone, yet not, can sometimes be exactly what you need." Kat glanced toward the ballroom, the swirl of movement and noise beyond their small cocoon. "This...mass of bodies, of diverging desires and intents around us. It's..."

"Suffocating," the woman murmured, drawing Kat's gaze back to her.

"Yes," she breathed, her heart thudding in her chest.

"What brought you here then, to such a throng of people if you hate crowds?"

"Crowds are much harder to control." Kat's lips thinned. "I'm here because..." She shrugged. "Too much of one thing isn't healthy, or so they say."

"You indulge too much in solitude? A curious notion, given the reason behind tonight's festivities. The entertainment industry isn't known for its isolation."

"True, but that doesn't mean we all have to be slaves to the same impulses," Kat said.

They looked at each other for a drawn-out beat. The woman's gaze seemed to swallow her.

"An interesting word choice. What impulse are you slave to?"

Kat shifted her weight, and a small smile spread over her lips. She leaned forward. "Right now, it seems like I'm a slave to a fascinating conversation with a mesmerizing stranger."

A faint blush colored the woman's cheeks, the hue reminiscent of her mask.

Kat's fingers tingled.

Just as the clock struck midnight, the woman in scarlet leaned closer still, her feathers on her dress whispering against the dark floor, her expression promising trouble.

“Care to steal away for a moment?” she murmured, her voice low and inviting. “There’s a balcony with a view begging for a private audience.”

A shiver ran down Kat’s spine. With a single, meaningful nod, she followed the captivating woman out of the ballroom toward a moonlit conversation, a prospect thrilling her more than anything had in a long time.

When she stepped onto the balcony, the masked woman leaned against the banister, gazing at the star-strewn sky. Crickets chirped, and Kat drew in a deep breath, wishing the air were a tad warmer.

“Do you always entice strangers to follow you to abandoned balconies?” Kat asked.

The woman turned, her full lips curving into an enthralling smile. “Are you a stranger if I’ve had my eyes on you from the instant you arrived?”

Kat’s tremble had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

# Chapter 3

## *Your Face*

Kat slapped the coffee machine with a grunt. The last thing she needed today was for the decrepit gadget to die. She'd murder someone if she didn't get her coffee in a hot second.

Tapping her foot, she pressed another set of buttons, and with a splutter and a splash, the machine sprang to life, spewing out her black elixir. She inhaled deeply—the scent of coffee alone already an improvement.

She leaned against the counter, about to take her first sip, when Reeve strode into the break room.

"Trouble in paradise, huh?" He pulled a mug out of the cupboard.

Kat gritted her teeth. Rumors spread fast. "It's hard to integrate a new character."

"Hmm, I've heard our leading lady was the problem today. What gives? Is the new gal *rubbing* you the wrong way?"

Kat swallowed another sip and pressed her lips together, regarding Reeve. They usually got along fine. Who had spit into his coffee this morning? "She's fine. We'll get the hang of it."

"She's just thirty." He sighed. "It's a shame, all that youth wasted on the young. You'd think experience mattered more, especially in our business."

"Hannah isn't new to acting." Great. Now Reeve had her defending Hannah.

He snorted. "The verdict on her talent is still out, but she is gorgeous."

Kat stiffened.

"I've been meaning to ask Darla to add a little romance between Laine's character and good, old Benson." He waggled his eyebrows.



Kat's knuckles paled as she placed her cup on the counter. "Our show isn't about romance, and your characters are what—twenty-five years apart? Allison is a much better fit for Benson."

Reeve laughed. "She's not the type for a love story the audience would eat up."

"You're pretty much the male version of her character. Why would the audience want *you* but not Elaine?"

"It's different for men." He shrugged. "Young women love rugged older men."

"Where did you come across this fantasy?"

"If anyone lives in a fantasy world, it's you. You're jealous of Laine because she's younger and prettier than you," Reeve sneered. "I'd be careful. All you've got is your acting chops, and if those go... Well, I seem to recall a time when your diva act got you in trouble before. Wouldn't want that to happen again now, would we?"

Kat stiffened. She'd never seen Reeve like this. It shattered her entire view of him. They had talked before about the woes of aging in their industry, but for Reeve to come at her like that?

As if she didn't have enough on her plate. She didn't have the bandwidth to deal with hurt egos and weird temper tantrums. She'd just ignore him.



Once she had dragged herself back to her trailer, Kat dropped onto her couch and bent her head forward, massaging her temples.

What a mess. That disaster scene, followed by Reeve and his unexpected vitriol. What was happening with her life?

She couldn't just blame Hannah for the scene, given that the woman had remained placid and stoic throughout, enduring all the needed retakes until Kat managed to portray the "right emotion" toward her new partner.

Kat clenched her jaw, sending the muscle in her temple twitching. She needed to be careful, avoid giving herself a headache. Not to mention, she was better than this. Kat had disliked fellow actors before, and never once had this affected her performance—and it never had turned her into a rank amateur unable to finish a scene.

She'd never seen Ron so frustrated with her. She couldn't even blame it on him being starstruck with Hannah. Kat straightened, and with a sigh, rose to change and start a relaxing yoga routine.

Perhaps it would allow her a restful sleep once she got home. She still had one more scene to film with Jackson, but she had two more hours to kill before then.

A knock rattled the metal of her door.

Kat let out a heavy sigh. So much for her yoga session. "Yes."

Her lips parted when the door swung open and Hannah Laine stood at her threshold. Kat straightened, her voice rough. "Can I help you?"

"That's what I'm here to ask."

Kat tilted her head. She supposed she should appreciate straightforwardness. "Come on in."

Hannah stepped inside, and, unlike most people, her gaze didn't wander to take in and judge Kat's trailer. She just stared directly at her.

"Do you want to sit down?"

"I prefer to stand."

"All right. What's this about?"

Hannah stared at her with a pinched expression, as if wrestling with something.

"Well?"

"Why do you hate me?"

Kat blinked furiously. "I don't."

"Then you're a terrible actress, and we both know that's not the case."

Kat didn't have a reply to this mix of insult and compliment, especially since she was equally taken aback by Hannah's appearance: She still wore her outfit from their earlier scene—an emerald blazer nipped at her waist that highlighted the champagne-silk blouse beneath and contrasted with her dark slacks.

But what really startled Kat was her expression. Hannah's curly blonde hair, high cheekbones, and clear blue eyes normally projected a warm, alluring presence that made people—men and women alike—lose their train of thought.

Seeing this face arrested in anger and frustration—her eyes stormy, her strong jaw tight—transformed Hannah from classically beautiful to striking.

"Everyone on set and in the cast has been exceedingly nice and welcoming, yet you either act like I don't exist or as if I'm infected with a virulent disease."

Kat shook her head, trying to gather her wits. "If this is because of how long it took to get the scene down—"

"That's part of it," Hannah said. "But it's beyond that. You've been borderline rude to me from the start. You treat me like an annoying child who has stolen your favorite toy, and, yes, this simple scene shouldn't have required so many takes. I expected more from you."

Kat shared Hannah's sentiment, but she wasn't about to admit that. She also wished Hannah would remember their encounter two years ago because knowing she was the only one who did added a layer of tension that Kat found almost unbearable.

"There's no obligation for us to be friends or get along."

"Of course not. I'm generally well-liked, and—"

Kat raised one eyebrow. "What? Am I ruining some kind of quota?"

Hannah's jaw tightened. "You're talking nonsense. No, I would prefer to be disliked for a reason."

"Maybe I don't like your face." Kat folded her arms and stifled the immediate urge to bang her head against the nearest wall as heat turned her cheeks scarlet.

Hannah's brows furrowed. "What's wrong with my face?"

"I never said there's anything wrong with it. Just that I don't like it. Actually, I didn't say that—I was just making a point."

She could hardly say, "Your face is so beautiful it almost hurts to look at you, much like it did back then." Although she supposed Hannah had likely heard the first part before, and the last thing she needed was Kat offering such a sentiment.

"That still makes no sense. You can't just reject someone because you don't like how they look!"

"I can dislike you because I don't like your shoes or the way you wear your hat."

Hannah's gaze dropped to her feet before she looked at Kat again. "My shoes? And I don't even wear a hat!"

Kat rolled her eyes. "I'm pointing out you don't need a good or logical reason to dislike someone." Just enough experience.

Hannah's lips thinned, and her eyes narrowed again. "Fine. Maybe you don't need a reason to dislike someone, but you don't fool me. It's not my face that bothers you."

"You mean unlike how you fool everyone else?"

Yes. An offensive move made more sense than her previous perplexed fumbling, not to mention her first outburst.

Hannah's face faltered. "What?"

"Too close to home?" She shouldn't enjoy this as much as she did. As confusing as it had been at first, witnessing Hannah's agitation energized her now more than her planned yoga session could have accomplished.

"I'm afraid you're seeing things that aren't there," Hannah said.

"No, that's everyone else's problem, but it's understandable—a facade like yours blinds people. All that polish. Is there anything of substance left?"

"I've done nothing to you!"

*Unlike you*, hung heavily between them, but maybe just in Kat's imagination.

She shook her head. She refused to go there. It would defuse her fire and instead swamp her with a heaviness she'd tried hard to eradicate. "Again, it's not something you did. It's—"

"My face." At those words, Hannah's expression turned stony.

"Right." God, her face. Kat still struggled to believe she'd thrown that out there. She usually wasn't this childish.

Hannah shook her head and looked away. "I don't know why I bothered coming here."

"Beats me."

Hannah turned to leave, but before she opened the door, she spun around again. "You're the lead in a popular show. I'd think you'd be interested in its continued success."

"Sure," Kat replied. "Your point?"

"Well, how is this going to work with us at each other's throats?"

"We haven't fought before now. You sought me out to find out why I don't like you, which was also, incidentally, your assumption. I never said I don't like you, and—"

"Hate me."

"Excuse me?" A sinking feeling crept over Kat.

"I asked why you hate me."

"Right. Even worse. That's quite an intense emotion to waste on someone I don't even know."

Hannah once more only stared at Kat. "You only hate people you know?"

"How else would you be able to hate someone?"

Hannah raised her arms before dropping them. "I don't know. People hate others for stupid reasons—some because they don't like their *face*."

Kat couldn't suppress a grin. Hannah's expression—a mixture of frustration and confusion—was adorable, even if Kat would never admit it out loud. "I suppose I reserve hatred for someone I truly know and despise." *Or someone who pretends to be something they're not.*

"You're the strangest person I've ever met, and *that's* saying something."

Kat shrugged. "It's all right."

Hannah huffed. "You still haven't answered my question. How will we handle this at work?"

"We're actors, aren't we? We'll pretend. You appear to be quite good at that."

Hannah narrowed her eyes, pivoted on the spot, and stomped out of Kat's trailer, slamming the door shut behind her.

Kat froze. What the hell had just happened? She was usually more restrained. But this entire situation—her general sense of...deflation and this emotional upheaval brought on by Hannah joining the show—had left Kat unbalanced. She didn't like it, and she wasn't sure she liked how she'd just acted either.

Yet, arguing with Hannah, and seeing her fired up, had also felt almost invigorating. Everything around Kat had become so bland and boring lately.

Still, Hannah had a point. The two of them not getting along would make their job harder, and it could hurt *Broken Time*.

It would have been so much smarter to deflect Hannah's inquiry, to play nice and maybe stroke the woman's ego a bit. Kat could woo anyone if she set her mind to it. Something about this version of Hannah Laine, though, set her on edge.

The woman on the balcony had been full of life, humor, and thoughtfulness. All that was left here seemed like a pale shadow.

Kat resented the change more than she should—after all, she was the one who'd ended it.



Two days later, they had a grueling day on set where everything went wrong, and no, it wasn't Kat's fault this time.

The day started wrong—the lights flickered the moment Kat set foot on set. Next, one of their cameras wouldn't turn on, and then the time machine was missing a panel. No one knew how that had happened, and when they

couldn't find it, they decided to add it digitally or to use old footage if necessary.

In today's scenes, their characters received a new assignment, and Hannah raised ethical concerns.

Ron had suggested they rehearse their lines together (likely to prevent another endless-retake moment), so they had settled in an empty dressing room and played out the scene. Toward the end, and with time left, Hannah said, "I kind of agree with Carla."

"That's funny. I don't see you speaking up like she does."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're a people pleaser, aren't you? You always say and do the right thing, or better, what others want or expect from you." Kat's voice leaked more venom than she'd intended. Perhaps Hannah's behavior reminded her of her own struggle to stop caring about what other people thought.

"Are you calling me a kiss-up?"

"Perhaps."

Hannah leaned closer. "I don't flatter people. I'm honest, but, yes, I'm friendly and accommodating. Why on earth wouldn't I try to get along with the group of people I might be working with for years? A group that is already close to each other, and to whom I am an outsider?"

*Outsider.*

Hannah's tone resonated within Kat, sounding more real than anything else Hannah had said so far. She shook her head.

"There's getting along, and then there's lacking a backbone, not having your own take on things. Like yesterday, when Ron said that scene needed to be more upbeat and you nodded, even though you'd just said it played better subdued.

"You agree with everyone and everything, potentially at the expense of your own peace of mind." *And this will only hurt you.*

Since when did Kat care? It wasn't her job to protect Hannah from life. What a ludicrous thought.

"I don't agree, and don't act like you care about my peace of mind."

Kat waved her off. "You don't agree because I'm calling you out and you don't appreciate it."

"You see what you wish to see, but at least I don't take pleasure in being insensitive and putting others down!"

"Excuse me! I'm not belittling you. Speaking the truth is just that—truth. I'm sorry if you can't handle someone seeing right through you and your act to be everyone's darling."

"I bet you're one of those people who calls themselves brutally honest, which is nothing but a shady excuse for being awful to others."

"Wrong again. I'm honest, to the point of being blunt, but there's a difference between those qualities and being deliberately cruel. I don't hurt others or act like I'm better than anyone else."

Hannah laughed without a trace of humor. "Oh, that's rich. Can you even spell self-awareness?"

"Can you have a genuine conversation with someone?" Kat knew she could, she had been there, she had talked to Hannah, and yet nothing.

She almost shivered at the vision of pure rage darkening Hannah's eyes.

That was when the lights flickered again, followed by a bang plunging them into darkness, silencing all sound around them, even the low hum of the AC.

"Great," Kat grumbled. "A power outage." They'd both left their purses in the break room before heading here to rehearse, so no phone flashlights. How annoying.

Hannah said nothing, but her breathing picked up.

"Don't worry," Kat said on instinct. "The backup generators should kick in any moment." She paused. "We could also head out?"

Silence, except for their breathing. With the AC off, the air quickly grew stale and humid.

"Do you want to find our way out? We might stumble a bit, but I don't think there was much in the way between here and the door."

Hannah once more didn't reply.

Kat never realized how loud breathing could sound, or the eeriness of sitting here in the dark, especially next to the last person you'd choose to be with.

"Are you all right?" Kat asked finally.

"Yes," Hannah croaked, her voice shaky.

"Are you afraid of the dark?" That didn't track—hadn't she snuck onto crumbling barn roofs as a kid to watch the stars?

"No."

*Sure. That's why you don't want to leave and sit here breathing hard.*

Kat suppressed a sigh.

A screeching noise, like something heavy being dragged across metal, cut through the silence, making Hannah gasp while Kat tightened her hold on her seat.

Stillness followed once more.

There was no reason for Hannah to trust or be honest with her, given everything that had happened between them and all that remained unsaid. However, judging by Hannah's breathing and the light trembling Kat perceived, even in the dark, she couldn't just do nothing.

"My friend Liz lives in Texas," she began. "We've known each other forever. She has a cat—a real rude little asshole named Raji." She paused. "Liz adores him, so don't tell her I said that. She found him at the side of the road when he was a kitten. The first time I saw him, he vomited at my feet."

Hannah exhaled a soft, almost-laughing sound.

As they waited for the lights to come back on, Kat shared all her Raji adventures she could think of until Hannah's breathing settled.



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# A Question of Courage

BY SABRINA BLAUM

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