

UNEXPECTED TIES

by
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CHAPTER ONE

The air was damp and cold when they exited the taxi, the last of winter stubbornly holding on, while spring had yet to firmly grip the Canadian Maritimes. Overhead, dark clouds hid the stars and threatened rain, granting a fuzzy halo to the lights of the Glengarry Hotel. The group quickened their steps to the front entrance, and as they entered the lobby, a pall of impending doom engulfed Nikki Harris.

“I don’t think this is a good idea at all.”

“It’ll be fine,” Kate Shannon, her lover of a few months, assured her. Her steady manner granted Nikki enough courage to steel herself for their actual entrance into the lavish conference room.

“What are they going to do? Lynch you?” Susan Carlson asked as she tucked her arm neatly into the crook of her husband Ted’s elbow.

His dark, even eyes danced at the comment. Tall, slender, and very quiet, he tended to let his shorter, stouter, and very outgoing wife do most of the talking.

Nikki glanced at Kate’s best friends and wished she were somewhere else. The Historical Society Dinner was formal, and she didn’t do well with formal affairs, not that she had ever actually been to one. Furthermore, she didn’t know these people, and would probably never know them under normal circumstances, but they probably had preconceived notions about her. A rope was exactly what Nikki was afraid would happen, and perhaps even a nice little bonfire added into the mix just for good measure.

She still didn’t understand why Kate, who normally kept a low profile, would choose this dinner as her unofficial coming-out party. Although Nikki was far from closeted, she was much more cautious than Kate, who, after years of married life and public approval, had now embraced her sexuality with all the fervor of the born-again. She

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acted as if she *wanted* to challenge the people of their small town with her recent change.

“Don’t worry.” Kate squeezed her hand tightly. “I’ll take care of you.”

Nikki had to be content with that reassurance, though the keen sense of not belonging, of being in unfamiliar, uncomfortable territory, remained. She suspected that she was safe only because Kate was one of the society’s most generous contributors. The others wouldn’t dare offend her.

Nikki, on the other hand, was just a poor country girl born outside the town limits. They might vent their displeasure on her rather than Kate for this blatant challenge to their cherished attitudes and perceptions.

As they walked toward the registration table, Nikki noted the head table, where the society president and other notables would sit. Covered with a snowy tablecloth, silverware and china gleaming, it stood in the exact center of the room, a place of decided prominence in clear view of everyone present. Nikki, her hand slippery in Kate’s gentle grasp, was acutely aware of the stares and subtle whispers that followed her and Kate. Nikki steeled herself from pitching forward on her face in a spectacular display that would delight the interested observers surrounding them.

Nor did it help that the high heels she was wearing added two inches to her already generous five-foot-eight frame. Earlier in the week, Nikki had traveled all the way to Halifax, Nova Scotia’s capital city located forty-five minutes south of Truro. There, she had willingly accepted advice from Kate’s best friend Susan about what to wear at a formal dinner, though it had cost her most of a week’s salary.

The cream-colored jacket and skirt tailored to her lanky body set off her crimson silk blouse nicely, while her hair and makeup were perfect after she passed most of the afternoon in a beauty salon under Susan’s direct supervision. A diamond heart-shaped pendant, a Valentine’s Day gift from Kate, rested softly against the hollow of Nikki’s throat, matched by small diamond studs that adorned freshly pierced ears. Even contacts replaced the granny glasses she normally wore. The glow of Kate’s gaze when she first saw Nikki confirmed that the whole ordeal had somehow been worth it, but privately, Nikki felt like a little girl playing dress-up. She had to force herself not to run screaming from the room.

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To calm her nerves, she focused on Kate, whose sapphire dress complemented her compact form and highlighted her bluish-gray eyes and the auburn hair that fell softly about her classic cheekbones and rounded jaw. Hints of gold at her neck and ears glinted elegantly in the soft light, and Nikki could detect Kate's delicate perfume. She was stunning, and Nikki felt inexplicably proud. Despite her trepidations, she was here as Kate's date, and no one could take that from her.

Lillian Salter, whom Nikki recognized from Kate's earlier description of the woman, stood at the reception table, regarding them with barely concealed dismay. Fortunately, as the society's treasurer and secretary, Lillian respected and feared Kate's position in town, so she didn't indulge in any open hostility.

"Mrs. Shannon," she said, subtly emphasizing Kate's previous marital state. She scanned Nikki briefly with watery blue eyes and glanced away, frowning. "And guest. You're at the head table."

"Thank you, Lillian." Kate's smile was a display of bared teeth that offered challenge rather than any warmth, making the rake-thin Salter twitch uncertainly.

Susan and Ted were also located at the head table. When Susan raised an inquiring eyebrow, Salter informed them, "Apparently, a few of the board members decided not to come tonight, or," she almost, but not quite, squinted significantly at Kate, "requested seating at other tables."

Kate didn't react beyond a tiny smile that touched the corners of her mouth, but Nikki wasn't at all confused. She felt sick.

"Nikki."

Turning in reaction to the unexpected hail, Nikki faced Rick Johnson, one of the town's constables and her co-worker at the police station. Tall and broad-shouldered, he wore a dark suit that struggled to cover his broad, powerful body and tugged uncomfortably at his necktie. His cologne almost overpowered her, and Nikki tried not to inhale deeply as they drifted away from the group at the reception area.

"You clean up real good, Nikki." He gazed at her with dark, dispassionate eyes that called attention to the high cheekbones typical of his First Nation heritage.

"Thanks." She was relieved to finally receive an objective opinion. "Where's Betty?"

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“Are you kidding?” He snorted. “It’s bad enough I have to come to these things as part of my job. She wouldn’t show up for this on a dare. It’s not her idea of the ideal date.”

Nikki sighed. “I know how she feels, but I wish she was here. Then I’d have someone to talk to.”

“You have me and Susan and Ted,” Kate interjected, joining them. She reached out to her old friend, clasping his fingers briefly. “Rick, I’m glad you could make it.”

“Oh, I’d much rather be on a stakeout in a snowstorm, or having my fingernails removed. I’m only here because the chief couldn’t find another sucker to represent the station.”

“You mean you couldn’t find a good excuse at the ready when he asked?” Ted laughed and shook Rick’s hand. “I know the feeling. How do we let ourselves get talked into these things?”

The two men quickly fell into a conversation about hunting while Kate and Susan gleefully discussed the various people who were and weren’t present, not always in the most complimentary terms. Left to her own devices, Nikki scanned the room restlessly and noticed a small group observing her.

Two of the three men boasted similar features, as if they were related in some way—stocky, though relatively handsome, with blond or silver hair and light-colored eyes. The other was darker and thinner. Two young, well-dressed women, one blond and the other brunette, flanked an older woman who glared at Nikki as if she were something a dog had done and no one had picked up. Shivering, Nikki turned away from their scrutiny just in time to see a man embrace Kate with undue familiarity. Nikki was unprepared when the newcomer immediately reached out to her.

“You must be Nikki.” Of average appearance, with thinning brown hair and dark eyes, he was completely unremarkable, except when he smiled. Then warmth and kindness radiated from him like heat from a hearth and made him handsome in an unusual way. “I’m David Shannon.”

Nikki was taken aback. *Kate’s ex-husband?*

“This is my wife, Ellen.”

“Nice to meet you.” Nikki uncertainly accepted the woman’s hand. Appraising the couple covertly, she decided that the man had not exactly traded down after Kate. Ellen was willowy and brunette, an

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elegant woman with a gentle smile who spoke readily to Kate.

Nikki remembered Kate telling her that the issue of children had caused her divorce, not any sense of personal rancor toward her husband. For the first time, Nikki vaguely understood how the marriage could have happened. David was affable in the same way Kate was, and possessed a ready charm and wit. Nikki experienced a mild twinge of jealousy when Kate put her hand briefly on David's forearm as they laughed and talked, in what seemed an unconscious habit. But since Ellen didn't appear concerned, Nikki decided that she shouldn't be either.

"I have to tell you, Kate," David was saying, "You really shook them up tonight. A lot of people didn't believe that you'd show. Or they thought if you did, you'd leave your significant other at home."

Kate lifted a thin brow. "I don't know why they would think that. I've *never* missed a dinner."

He laughed. "You're not taking any prisoners tonight, are you?"

Kate gave a thin-lipped smile. "Not on your life." She glanced toward the front of the room and grasped Nikki's hand firmly. "I think it's time to be seated."

As she accompanied Kate to the head table, Nikki leaned over to her lover. "No prisoners?"

Kate glanced at her, an amused glint in her blue-gray eyes. "He was joking."

Nikki suspected the warrior description was more accurate than Kate was willing to admit. A steely resolve ran through the core of that refined and gentle exterior, and while it didn't show itself often, very few people dared defy it.

So why was Nikki afraid that someone would do just that tonight?

CHAPTER TWO

As Kate picked at her catered meal, she glanced affectionately at her lover. She knew how uncomfortable Nikki felt and how big a sacrifice all this was for her. Still, Nikki didn't truly understand why attending this function was so important. Kate was determined to show the rest of her social circle in Truro that she was as comfortable in her relationship with Nikki as she had ever been with David. This public appearance would stifle the speculation, rumors, and flat-out gossip about them much quicker than if she attempted to hide, or act as if being romantically linked to a woman was somehow shameful or sinful.

Of course she could indulge herself in such brash behavior because she had literally nothing to lose. No one could touch her financially, and she contributed to social causes not because she desired to be part of any certain circle, but because she wanted to. While she understood why so many chose to remain in the closet, such secrecy wasn't an option for her. She didn't care if a few bigots were offended, but she did not want Nikki made to feel uncomfortable.

My darling definitely deserves a gift. Perhaps some new heart-shaped earrings to match the necklace now that she has her ears pierced.

"So, Kate, what do you think about the society's new project?"

Reluctantly, Kate tore her eyes away from Nikki and turned to the dinner partner at her other side, granting him her full attention. Matthew Turner, president of the Historical Society, had avoided any mention of her new romantic relationship all evening. In fact, he successfully hid any distaste, which contrasted markedly to his wife. Celia Elliot-Turner was ignoring both Kate and Nikki as she concentrated sullenly on her meal. Obviously she would rather be sitting with her family across the room. If Kate liked her at all, she might have pitied her.

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“I think restoring the old post office is a wonderful idea,” Kate said, as if she had been paying attention to the conversation the entire time.

As she continued to speak with Matthew about the proposition, she slowly became aware of eyes boring into her, and glanced over to meet the frozen gaze of Hannah Elliot, Celia’s mother. A stout woman, with snowy hair and mud dark eyes, Hannah was a formidable figure in both appearance and wealth, and a friend of Kate’s grandmother. Though Kate respected the Elliot matriarch’s position in town, she didn’t care for her personally, finding her overbearing and occasionally harsh. Hannah had reacted to Kate’s coming out by demanding a change in seating. Kate did not miss her presence at the head table and her decision had afforded Susan, Ted, Rick, David, and Ellen the unusual privilege of joining Kate at the center of things rather than being scattered throughout the room as they had been in previous years.

Kate shrugged mentally, avoiding the offended glare. She certainly hadn’t insisted anyone move from the head table, and she wasn’t going to let Hannah’s limited and ignorant worldview affect her enjoyment.

After coffee and dessert had been served, the crowd loosened up, people visiting other tables, milling and mingling for the social part of the evening. Kate, who had been talking to David and Ellen about the bookstore, was not pleased when she saw Hannah Elliot bearing down on the head table like the bow of a massive ship parting the waves. Next to her, Matthew rose to his feet at the same time Kate did, and they both forced smiles, though he couldn’t hide his alarm at his mother-in-law’s approach. Obviously he was no more ready to face her than Kate was.

“Mother Elliot,” he said, manfully ignoring the fact that she was glaring past him at Kate.

“I can’t believe your behavior, Kathryn.” Hannah lifted her cane slightly to gesture in the general direction of Nikki. “Parading your disgusting lifestyle about as if it were normal.”

Her jaw firming, Kate glared back, absolutely incensed. “Hannah, considering your family’s reputation in this town, I wouldn’t be so hasty to cast stones.”

Hannah’s head jerked back, and her eyes tightened. Kate supposed that it had been so long since anyone had challenged Hannah, she wasn’t sure how to respond.

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“Your grandmother would be absolutely appalled,” she finally sputtered.

Kate stared her down scornfully. “My grandmother never backed down from anyone in her life. I’m no different.”

“You can’t believe Irene would ever approve this aberrant alliance. I warn you, Kathryn, you lie down with dogs, you’re apt to get up with fleas.” Hannah’s face grew dangerously red.

Kate actually took a step toward the stout woman, unable to remember being this furious. She was vaguely aware of Susan hurrying around the table to grasp her shoulder, preventing her from going any farther.

“I think it would be a good idea to return to your table, Mother Elliot.” Matthew positioned himself between them. Kate knew that being married to Celia had bound him to the Elliot family, but he would never go up against her, the granddaughter of Irene Taylor. He raised a hand weakly, obviously attempting to placate both her and Hannah and doing a poor job of it.

“I’m going to inform Irene of this situation as soon as possible,” Hannah spat at Kate as the rest of the family tried to unobtrusively move her away from the conflict. “She’ll know what to do with you.”

“You do that,” Kate responded hotly to the woman’s retreating back. Literally shaking in fury, she turned around to see Susan regarding her with a sarcastic expression. “What?”

“Hey, don’t snap at me.” Susan raised her hands defensively, but the grin on her face indicated she was more amused than embarrassed. “Unlike you, I’m not spoiling for a fight.”

Kate finally looked around, conscious of all eyes glancing in her direction, and she composed herself instantly, shoving her anger down where it wouldn’t control her. Though neither woman had raised her voice, it was apparent that she and Hannah were exchanging unpleasant words, and the entire room had been watching and eavesdropping breathlessly, no doubt greatly entertained by the whole situation.

“Where’s Nikki?”

“She went to the ladies’ room not long after the catfight started.” Rick’s tone was unnaturally even. “I guess she wasn’t as amused as the rest of us.”

Stung by the casual comment, Kate gave him a dark look and

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immediately headed for the powder room. Inside, she encountered some women from her golf club who took in her stormy expression, immediately cut off their conversation, and hastily vacated the premises. Leaning against the sink counter, Kate was astonished to discover she was still shaking. As she tried to compose herself, one of the stall doors opened and Nikki emerged, walking over to the nearest sink to wash her hands. She glanced at Kate, not appearing particularly upset, but definitely not happy, either.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said after a moment, when Nikki didn’t speak to her. “What occurred out there should never have happened.”

Nikki shrugged. “It’s what I expected. I’m just surprised it took so long for one of your friends to make a fuss.”

Kate was stung once more. “Hannah is no friend of mine.”

“One of your enemies, then.” Nikki pulled some paper towels from the dispenser and dried her hands. “This is what happens. I tried to explain when you first came up with this idea. You just didn’t want to listen.”

“I don’t believe the ranting of one old woman—”

“She just had the guts to say what all the rest are thinking.” Nikki tossed her used towel into the trash bin. “Ultimately, this is how it works in a small town. Keep this life quiet, don’t flaunt it, and people tolerate it to a certain extent. Make a show of it, try to rub people’s faces in it, and you’re just asking for someone to take offense. You thought no one would dare, but you were wrong.”

“I’m not the one that’s wrong, Nikki.” Despite Kate’s best effort, some of her anger spilled over. “Hannah’s the one who’s out of line.”

“Probably, but does it really matter? We’ve made others restrain themselves around us slightly, Kate, but their fear and hatred of what’s different is still going to be the same.”

Kate started to respond and then took a deep breath, forcing herself to consider her words carefully. “Nikki, you can’t keep turning the other cheek. That’s letting them win—”

“Kate, you’ve been gay for all of a few months.” A spark flared in Nikki’s eyes. “You don’t exactly have the experience to know what you’re fighting here. There are far easier and more useful methods to make strides than to march directly into the heart of enemy territory waving your rainbow flag.”

“But that’s the point, Nikki, this isn’t enemy territory. It’s as much

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my world as theirs, and I'll be damned if I'll let these small-minded idiots tell me how I should behave at an event that I've attended since I was fourteen."

Nikki's jaw firmed visibly. Her eyes were still bright with anger. "You're right, this is *your* world. The trouble is, you keep forgetting that it's not mine. They don't want me invading their territory whether I'm sleeping with you or not."

Brushing past her, Nikki strode out of the room, and, jolted by Nikki's final comment, Kate followed, intending to continue their discussion. But she forgot their argument as she reentered the dining room and found herself transfixed by what had occurred in her absence.

Stephen Elliot III had collapsed across the table, a situation suddenly far more interesting to the crowd than Kate Shannon's date for the Historical Society dinner.

