

Chapter One

On the Rocks was packed. Nola Newhouse shouldered her way through the door into the hottest Irish pub in Chelsea. Tucking her handbag under her arm, she made a beeline straight for the bar. After a long week at work, she needed a cocktail. *Stat.*

Her feet throbbed. Her new Dolce and Gabbana heels looked divine, but hurt like hell. She hid a wince. They were worth the splurge, but she couldn't wait to take them off when she finally got home to her apartment.

She squeezed into a spot at the gleaming, wooden bar and signaled a bartender. Since she came here a lot, she already had the cocktail menu memorized. "A Celtic martini, please."

The young man, wearing a black shirt topped with a green apron, smiled at her. "Coming right up."

Nola turned and scanned the bar. There was shining wood everywhere, and the walls were covered in framed photos of either the green Irish countryside or the whiskey-making process. On the Rocks prided themselves on their extensive collection of Irish whiskies, which her brother and his work friends appreciated.

Like her, there were lots of men and women in suits, all celebrating the end of the work week. She was meeting her brother and his wife, along with his work colleagues, for a few drinks.

She glanced at her silver Longines watch, which had been a recent gift from her father. It was

still early. Nick and the others wouldn't be here for a while.

The watch made her think of her father, and that made her roll her eyes. Charles Newhouse was rich and snobby. He was always badmouthing Nick, who was actually Nola's half-brother.

Nick was a former Navy SEAL, and now an integral part of the best security firm in New York City—Sentinel Security—which was owned by the delicious badass Killian Hawke.

But unless you wore a suit, had a fancy corner office, and made lots of money, her father wasn't interested. Money and prestige were the only signs of success he saw.

“Here you go.”

The bartender slid her glass across the glossy surface of the bar. Nola paid and smiled her thanks. She lifted the glass and took a big sip of lemony goodness.

Her father had been leaving her voicemails every day this week. He wanted to set her up with some hotshot stockbroker he knew.

No, thanks. She'd tried a blind date set up by her dad before. Once was enough. Not that dating apps were proving much better. She was sick of New York suits. Her last few dates had really been a new low.

Her cellphone vibrated. She pulled it out of her handbag and saw a text message from her assistant, Grace.

You got the listing, Nola! The penthouse in High Line Tower.

Yes! Nola grinned. The amazing penthouse was going up for sale, and she'd fought hard for the chance to be the Realtor for it.

“You, Magnolia Newhouse, are going to sell that gorgeous place.” She took another sip of her martini, then tapped out a message. She started with an emoji of a champagne glass.

I knew we'd get it.

I already sent your staging plan to Joanne. She's going to get her team to stage it tonight.

I knew there was a reason I hired you. Expect a big bonus when I sell this baby.

I'll hold you to that. If you need any changes to the staging furniture, let me know.

I'll go and check it out tomorrow.

Nola mentally checked her schedule. She always worked on a Saturday, and she could move some appointments around so she could inspect the penthouse. She already had a bunch of ideas for how she'd market it, and a few clients who'd be interested.

Her commission would be very large, and very lovely. There were definitely more designer shoes in her future. Plus, she could totally go and splurge on baby gifts for her niece.

Nick and his wife Lainie were pregnant. Lainie was Nola's best friend. She could hardly believe that her two favorite people were having a baby. Nola had plans to be the cool aunt, and on top of that, they'd also asked her to be the godmother.

A baby. Her brother and her best friend were having a baby.

Nola smiled, but all the happiness she felt for them didn't quite cover the hollow feeling she tried really hard to ignore. She knew what it was. Envy. She took a larger sip of her drink.

She sighed. She wanted a baby. Her thirty-second birthday was looming, and she'd started to hear the ticking of her biological clock. She was well aware that a woman's fertility declined after thirty-five.

She'd like a guy first. A good one. If he wasn't hard on the eyes and good in bed, that would be an added bonus.

But apparently finding the right guy was a tall order.

She lifted her drink again, and enjoyed feeling some of her stress melt away. She glanced across the bar and her gaze fell on a man walking through the crowd.

She froze with her glass in front of her mouth. *Holy hell.*

Her chest locked. Silver Fox alert.

The man was tall, with very broad shoulders. He was wearing dark jeans, a gray shirt, and a blazer over the top. More casual than most of the men around him, but it totally suited him. His jacket barely contained his muscular shoulders.

He had dark hair, but heavy on the salt-and-pepper at the temples. His face was rugged and tanned, and his jaw looked like it was chiseled from stone. It was covered by a short beard that was definitely going silver.

She knew immediately that he was a man who preferred being outside. Probably using his hands. Her gaze dropped. He had big hands. Capable-looking hands.

She flicked her gaze up, and their eyes met.

Instantly, Nola's belly warmed.

Then the crowd shifted, and she lost sight of him.

Wow. Resisting the urge to fan herself, she turned back to the bar and ordered a second drink.

"Hey, sweetheart. Want some company?"

Nola glanced sideways at the man who'd sidled up beside her. He looked about forty, his suit rumpled, and he smelled like he'd bathed in his cologne.

"No, thanks." She pinned on a polite smile. "I'm meeting some friends."

"Then why do you look so lonely?"

Her mouth flattened. "I'm not."

"I have to tell you, that skirt is—" his gaze ran down her body, and over her fitted knee-length, navy-blue skirt "—mighty fine."

Ew. "Look, none of that works if you're trying to get a woman's attention."

He blinked. “Really?”

“Really. Try to show some respect and act human.”

The shock on his face gave way to the flush of anger. “Bitch.”

She rolled her eyes. “And that *really* doesn’t work.” She grabbed her glass. Turning, she pushed into the crowd.

And almost collided with a hard chest.

“Oops, sorry.” In a feat of luck and reflexes, she lifted her glass up without spilling a drop. “I almost got my drink all over you.” She looked up.

Into the gray eyes of the silver fox.

A big hand rested on her elbow, steadying her. Nola’s pulse went crazy. His chest was even bigger up close, and she smelled a yummy, crisp cologne—something simple, with an undertone of limes and wood.

“You okay?” His voice was a deep rumble.

“Yes.” God, why was her voice so breathy?

The silver fox looked over her head, and frowned. “He bothering you?”

Nola glanced back and saw the idiot from the bar trying to follow her. He took one look at the big silver hottie, then quickly turned away.

She smiled. “Not now.”

Knox Holman hadn’t expected to come into the bar and get bowled over by a pint-sized sprite with short, black hair and huge, blue eyes.

Not to mention the tiny, curvy body, and the tight skirt.

He’d been planning to have a few beers with his new workmates, then head back to his new

apartment. Which, to be fair, was mostly boxes, but he was going to have to unpack them eventually.

He knew it was going to take some time to adjust to living in New York City. It was a long way from Camp Pendleton and California.

But he'd known it was time for a change.

"Thanks for the almost rescue." The sexy fairy smiled at him.

Damn, she was gorgeous. She smelled good, too, and her white shirt was unbuttoned enough to give a hint of cleavage.

"You looked like you were doing fine on your own." He glared at the back of the idiot who'd been hassling her.

"I'm a single woman in New York. I'm well-trained." She sipped her drink.

Single. The word reverberated in his head as he watched her lips. They closed over the delicate rim of her glass, giving him ideas. Ideas of what else he'd like to see those pretty lips wrapped around.

Damn. Knox lifted his bottle of beer and sipped. He was forty-seven. Way too old to be knocked sideways by lust.

"I'm Nola," she said.

"Knox."

"It's nice to meet you, Knox." She cocked her head. "Military man."

"Used to be. How can you tell?"

"My brother was in the Navy."

"I made the better choice. Marines."

Someone bumped into her, and Knox used his body to shield her. Taking her arm, he guided

her to the edge of the crowded room. He found a quiet, shadowed spot by the wall.

“What brings you to New York, Knox?”

“How do you know I’m not a local?”

She laughed. “Accent and the lack of attitude.”

He lifted his chin. He liked her laugh. “A new job. I just started today.”

“Congratulations.” She clinked her glass against his beer bottle. “Have you got a place to stay yet? I’m a Realtor.”

“I do. My new employer helped out.” It was an added bonus that his new job also provided accommodation.

“That’s handy,” Nola said. “So, you liking the Big Apple so far?”

“Not really.” He leaned closer and pulled in her scent. It was something sexy and spicy. “But it’s growing on me.”

She smiled. “I saw you. Before.” Her gaze warmed.

Damn, he liked knowing she was attracted to him. It lit up his nerve endings. He really wanted to find out how she felt pressed against him. It had been a really long time since a woman had bowled him over like this.

“I saw you, too. I thought you looked like a sexy sprite.”

Crap, had that sounded dumb?

A delicate flush filled Nola’s cheeks. She looked delighted. He’d never met someone who showed exactly what she felt on her face.

He was used to being guarded. He’d been a Marine Raider—the special forces of the Marines—for years, then helped train them for the last five.

“I thought you were a hot silver fox,” she murmured.

Knox resisted the urge to tug at his collar. “You like working in real estate?”

“I do. It’s a challenge to showcase all the best features of a property, and market it just right.

Then to match it to the right buyer. Actually, I just got a big listing.”

“Congratulations.”

Her gaze moved to his throat. “You have a tattoo.”

He knew she could probably just get a peek of the ink that covered his shoulder. “I’ve got a few.”

The look on her face made his cock twitch. He knew she was wondering what his tattoos looked like.

“I have one too,” she confessed. “A small one.”

He scanned her. “Where?”

She smiled. “It’s a secret.”

And just like that, her flirty smile had him as hard as a rock.

Knox wanted to know exactly where she had ink gracing her curvy body. Damn, he was way too old for flirting, but it felt good. It also made him realize that she was young.

“How old are you?” he asked.

She held up her glass. “Old enough to drink.”

He tensed.

“Relax, Knox. I’m thirty-one, but the big three-two is coming up fast.”

He leaned a shoulder against the wall. “You don’t sound happy about it. Trust me, thirty-two was a long time ago for me.”

She eyed him, then stroked her chin. “Forty-five?”

“Close. Forty-seven.”

She rolled her eyes. “So ancient.”

He reached out and gripped her hip, squeezed. “Careful, Sprite.”

She stepped closer. “You look very good for being so archaic.”

“I think you’re asking for a spanking.”

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted.

Knox swallowed a groan. “You like the idea of that, Nola?”

“I think so. I’ve never been spanked before, so I don’t know.”

He reached up and toyed with her hair. It was inky-black and silky. He liked the way it feathered against the back of her neck. Suddenly, he very much wanted to be the one to show her the pleasures of getting her ass spanked. He’d make her love his palm cracking on her smooth skin.

He moved his fingers down and touched her throat. “Your pulse is racing.”

“I know,” she breathed.

“Been a long time since a woman made me want to kiss her in the middle of a crowded bar.”

“Knox—” she licked her lips “—I wouldn’t say no if you did. And I’ve never said that before.”

He reached out and grabbed her glass. He set it and his beer down on a table nearby. Then he cupped her cheeks. Damn, her skin was soft.

He lowered his head and kissed her.

He wanted to go slow. He moved his mouth over hers. Her lips were plump and soft. Then she parted them, and her tongue stroked out to meet his.

Fuck. Knox felt like the world went up in flames. She made a hungry sound, and he shifted, pressing her back against the wall. Her arms wrapped around him, yanking him closer. He angled

his head and deepened the kiss, hungry for the taste of her.

She kissed him back eagerly, her tongue sliding against his. She made little sounds that drove him crazy.

Someone passed by, bumping against his back. When he lifted his head, he felt a little dizzy.

Nola was panting. “*Wow.*”

Wow didn’t cover it.

He slid his hand into her hair. “Nola—”

Then she looked over his shoulder, and her face changed. A huge smile broke out on those lips he’d just kissed. She wiggled a little, and he eased back.

“My brother and his friends are here,” she said. “Come and I’ll introduce you. You’ll like them.”

Knox turned his head, looking in the direction she was looking.

His body froze. *Fuck.* She was looking at his coworkers.