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Kristos sang the last note of the song and finished strumming his guitar while grinning at his buddies. After a brief pause the electric guitar started the next song and Kristos jumped in on his acoustic. Playing at the outdoor patio of the Hernandez Hacienda Mexican restaurant was one of his favorite things to do. The crowd clapped as the band started their next song. The small dance floor was packed. For a Friday night in the middle of July in Colorado Springs, it was about as good as it could get.

A woman dancing erratically caught his eye. Her blonde hair swayed, and there was a slight hitch in her swaying to the music, but he doubted anyone else noticed it. She had moved close to the stage when a man came and grabbed her arm. She tossed her drink at him but missed. The liquid hit Kristos in the face, chest, and guitar. He stopped playing as the band continued on. The woman struggled against the taller man's advances.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled.

Kristos set his guitar down, hopped off the stage, and pushed his way between the woman and the man. "Hey, break it up!" he shouted above the noise.

The woman's fierce expression, pursed lips, and narrowed eyes didn't focus on him but the man to his left. Before he realized it, a fist came out of nowhere and connected with his face, propelling him to the stage platform. Kristos rebounded quickly and with a swipe the man was flat on his back on the floor as people moved out of the way.

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Kristos motioned to the bouncer at the door who pushed through the crowd as the music ended. This was now a spectacle and not one he wanted to be involved in.

“Paul, can you remove this man for assaulting this woman and myself?”

“Do you want to press charges? Should I hold him for the authorities?” Paul asked, his ginormous biceps flexing as he restrained the attacker who was for the moment not fighting.

“She started it,” the man said.

“I didn’t start anything. I was dancing and enjoying myself when you decided to accost me and couldn’t understand the word *no* coming from my lips,” the young woman said as she swayed. Kristos reached out to steady her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off. “I want to press charges.”

Kristos eyed the woman. She was petite, possibly not even five feet tall. Her thick blonde hair came to her collarbone. Her eyebrows indicated her hair was originally brown. Not unusual. She was a pretty little package. Those pale green eyes flashed warning.

“The band will be taking a fifteen-minute break,” the lead vocalist said.

“Why don’t we go toward the entrance?” Kristos suggested. The crowd thinned as many returned to their seats to watch the tableau playing out before them.

“Come on,” Paul said as he led the man and woman toward the front door. Kristos followed behind. He could easily admire the view as the little spitfire walked ahead of him.

Out of the way of the crowd, Paul called the police. Kristos grabbed some napkins to wipe away the beer from his face and hair. Ugh. He’d splash some water on it when he got a chance.

The young woman turned his way. “I’m sorry my drink ended up all over you.”

“I’ll survive,” Kristos said. The manger strode toward him with an ice pack. Kristos grabbed it with a “Thanks, Andy.” He placed it up to his left cheek and winced. He’d be boasting a black eye tomorrow. No

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way to hide that from his family. He wiggled his jaw around. It hurt but Kristos didn't think anything was broken.



Eliza admired the guitar player. His dark wavy hair and short beard and mustache gave him the appearance of a cowboy. He wore boots and jeans, and that smile was something wonderful. She hadn't realized she'd danced her way up to the front of the stage.

"Tornado, what kind of trouble did you get into now?" Gabby asked as her friend stepped closer. Gabby was her roommate on post.

"Tornado?" the intriguing guitar player asked.

"It's a nickname, but I earned it the hard way. Specialist Elizabeth Torres. And you are?" She leaned forward, staring up at his face.

"I'm Kristos Sava. I wish we'd met under better circumstances."

"Were you aware your eyes have grey stars in them?" Eliza asked.

Kristos nodded. "I am aware but appreciate your noticing." He gave a half-smile.

"This is my roommate Gabby Madison." Eliza motioned her arm to the woman next to her.

"Hi, Kristos. Did she do this to you?" Gabby pointed at Kristos' face.

"No. The beer bath was courtesy of Tornado here and the fist to the face was thanks to this, um, guy." He directed his thumb at the now sullen man.

Eliza giggled. "You wanted to call him a gentleman, didn't you?"

Kristos shrugged and turned to the bouncer. "Paul, can you give the police my info? I need to be ready to get back on stage for our next set." He turned to Eliza and Gabby. "It's been fun, ladies, but I need to return to the stage."

Tornado grabbed his arm as he turned to leave. "Kristos. How can I find you again?" She dropped her hand when he stopped.

"I'm not sure why you would want to," Kristos said.

"Perhaps to tender a proper apology?" Eliza offered.

Kristos reached into his back pocket and pulled out a business card.

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“This is where I work and that’s my number.”

Eliza grinned. “Thanks. You’re cute. I like you.”

He bit his lip before replying. “I’m guessing you’re drunk. Gabby, I hope you are her ride home?”

“I am. It was nice meeting you.” Gabby tugged on Eliza’s arm.

“Oh.” Kristos put the ice pack on the bar counter. “And thank you both for your service.” He turned and strode to the back of the restaurant.

“What did you do?” Gabby hissed.

“I was enjoying the music,” Tornado defended.

Soon the police were there and she gave her statement and Gabby escorted her back to their table. The meal she’d ordered had arrived so they silently sat to eat. Tornado was grateful she had a view to the stage. She caught the eye of the cute guitarist and gave him a wink. If she wasn’t mistaken, he blushed.



The next morning Kristos walked into the barn to talk to his horses. This was his favorite place to be. He came to his oldest mare, Zena. He’d taken her in because she was no longer useful for breeding, and a bit long in the tooth for a Percheron. “Good morning, Zena. How’s my favorite girl?”

The horse snorted and touched her nose to his cheek in the gentlest movement.

“Yeah, some tiny soldier decided to dump beer on me and attract the attention of some creep who thought she was easy prey. And I, like an idiot, stepped in to help her. I should have stayed on the stage.”

Zena shook her head.

“You’re right as usual ol’ girl. She may be a capable woman, but I was raised to treat women with respect and to defend them should the need arise. Just grateful I avoided getting into more of a fight.”

The horse started chewing her hay as Kristos patted her neck. “Horses are so much easier to understand than women,” he whispered to himself.

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“They are, huh?” Kobbe, Kristos’ sister-in-law had snuck up on him. He turned to face her.

“Kristos! What happened to you?” Kobbe asked.

“Tried to help a damsel in distress and got punched by the guy inconveniencing her.”

“You didn’t fight back?”

“I did and called the bouncer. Charges were filed and he’s banned from the restaurant,” Kristos said.

“And the girl? Was she worth defending?” Kobbe gave a sly grin.

Kristos shrugged. “She was grateful. I doubt I’ll ever meet her again. She was drunk. Not my type.”

“Sorry.”

“She was military though. A specialist, I believe she said.”

“From Fort Carson?” Kobbe asked.

“That’d be my guess.”

“She must have been cute for a man to bother her and you to step in.”

“Doesn’t matter, Kobbe. I don’t drink, I don’t chew, and I won’t date girls who do.” Kristos grinned at the rhyme.

“Cute, and a good standard to set. I’m sure you’ll get lots of questions from *Mamá*.”

“I’m sure I will. Now, what can I do for you?”

Kobbe went on to describe a new client coming in for equine therapy and discuss what horse might be best suited for the need.

When she was finished, Kristos grabbed his laundry and headed to the house. If he left it in his apartment above the barn, the entire room would be overwhelmed with the odor of beer. He’d left his clothes out on the landing last night to keep that from happening, and he washed his face twice to make sure the scent wouldn’t be bothering him as he slept. Good thing he didn’t run into any law enforcement on the way home. He’d only drunk soda but still, the way he reeked he’d be walking a line and taking a breathalyzer test for sure.

He got his laundry started and headed back to his apartment above the stables to make his breakfast. As he fried some eggs he wondered about the spunky young soldier and why she’d been drinking. Women

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sometimes approached him at these events, but no one ever mentioned his eyes at least until a third or fourth date—if they ever got that far. His last girlfriend, Gloria, had dumped him after realizing he was only ever interested in raising horses. She didn't like the idea that he might expect her to muck out stalls. He chuckled to himself. Even his younger sisters Zoe and Sophia had done that chore over the years. It was part of living on a ranch.

The image of Miss Tornado flashed through his mind. She'd probably tell him she could do it better and proceed to show him. Oh well. She was cute but drinking and tossing beer on him were not clever ways to win his heart.

He wondered what a little pixie like her did in the military to earn the name Tornado. His brother Alexandros and his brother Rusty's wife, Jane, were both Army, so he respected those who served. Didn't mean he was interested in a military wife. Even if he saw her again, she'd likely be deployed somewhere else before long. The Army was fond of that practice.

Let it go, man. She's not your type.

So why couldn't he stop thinking about her?