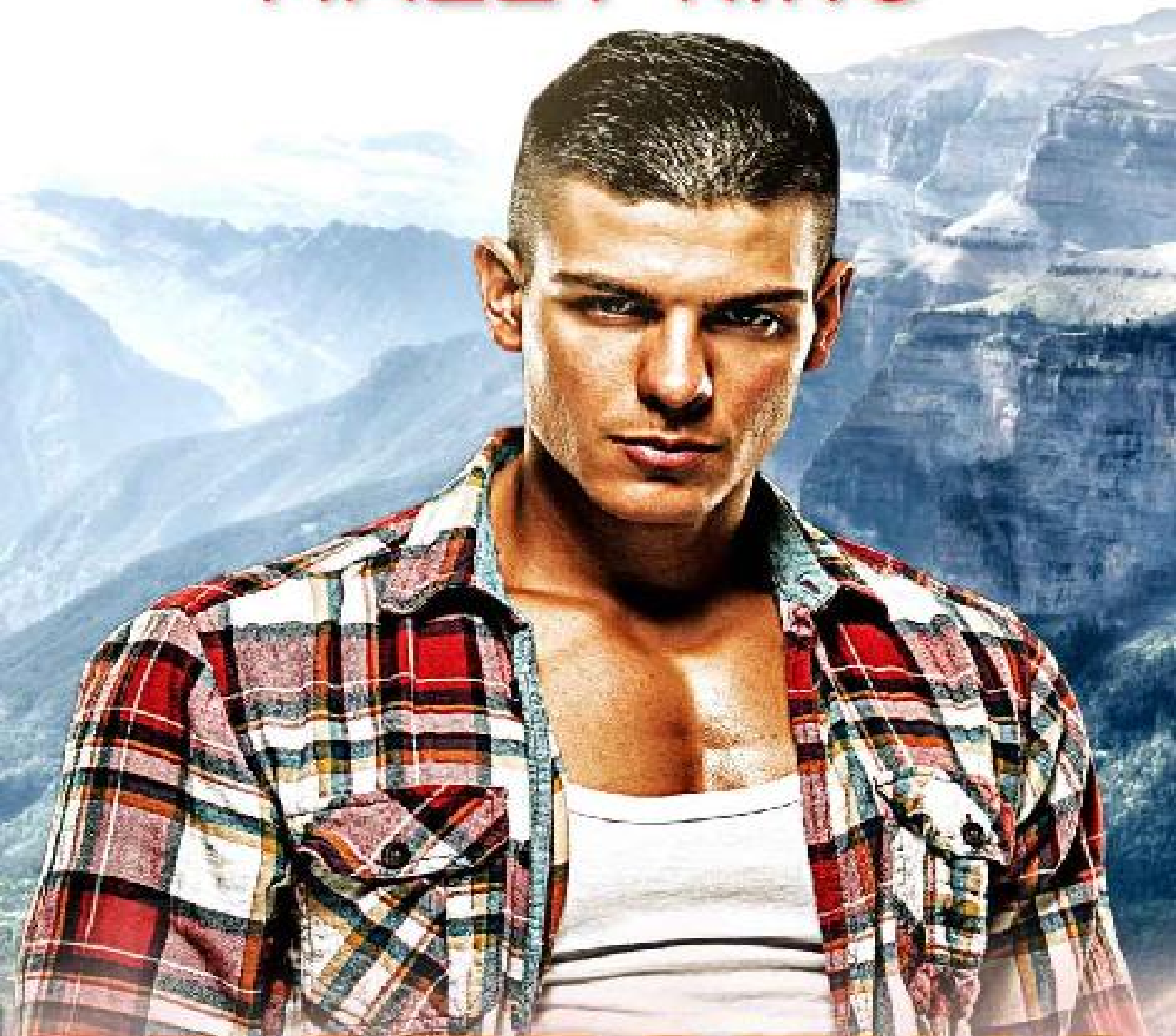


MAZZY KING



PROTECTING  
*Fier*

MAGNOLIA MOUNTAIN PD

MAGNOLIA MOUNTAIN PD BOOK 1

# PROTECTING *Her*

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*Jared Reeves*

WALKING into the Magnolia Mountain police station brings me a sense of calm, even though I can never predict what my days will look like. Sometimes it's busting looters or vandals. Sometimes I'm writing tickets for speeding. Other times, I'm doing welfare checks on our residents. Still, it's what I'm meant to do, and knowing that I'm living my purpose is what keeps me focused most days.

Other days, like this afternoon, only the steaming cup of coffee from the Magnolia Lodge Café can keep me focused.

“Late one?” Trevor McNeil asks, glancing up from his computer with a grin.

He's my deskmate, though second shift is sparse enough that we don't necessarily have to share. Magnolia Mount is a medium-sized town and our residents are all peaceful, hardworking people, but we are a bit of a tourist attraction during the spring and summer months, so attracting the occasional unsavory person is inevitable.

Like last night.

I groan, smacking a hand to my forehead. “Out until four in the morning looking for that little shithead. Finally caught him, and wasn't happy about it, either.”

I chased Benson Towns through Magnolia Mount for hours last night after huge swaths of offensive graffiti appeared on some of the more notable town buildings—the lodge, town hall, the police station, and a few other businesses in town.

The young man thought it'd be hilarious to literally paint our town red, and he was a master at hiding until I finally pulled him out of a stinking dumpster.

“Hopefully today will be an easy one,” Trevor says, suddenly sounding as weary as I do. “Anyway, your father wants to speak to you. Told me to send you in as soon as you got here.”

My father—the chief of police here in Magnolia Mount. Luckily, I haven't had to deal with any weirdness, other guys thinking I'm getting favored because I'm the boss's kid. My father has made me earn every bit of what it takes to wear the uniform, and when we're at work, he treats me the same as he treats the other officers. No better, no worse.

I knock on his door.

“Come in.”

I push the door open. Dad's sitting behind his desk, intently scrolling on his computer. “Hey, Pops.”

“Have a seat.” He nods to the chair across from him. “Great work catching that little shit last night, by the way.”

I spread my hands. “All in a day's work.”

“Well, I've got a new assignment for you that will have you mostly sticking around the station. That way you can catch up on your paperwork.” He arches a meaningful brow at me.

I smile weakly. Paperwork is far from my favorite thing to do, and my backlog proves it. “Well, what is it?”

“One of Magnolia Mount's more successful daughters is coming home from Hollywood for a little vacation.”

Immediately my heart shifts gears with a high, squealing whine only I can hear. Outwardly, I do my best to remain neutral.

I know *exactly* who he's talking about.

Still, I play dumb. “Who is that?”

“Irena Mathison. She plays that crime-solving baker on TV?”

I nod slowly, like it’s just coming to me.

“You went to high school with her.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “Her.”

“Anyway, it sounds like she’s got some trouble in Tinsel Town, so she’s coming here to lay low. Likely the paps are on her ass too, since some of her personal info got leaked, so she’s requested a little extra police presence around her grandmother’s house, where she’ll be staying.”

“Mrs. Mathison isn’t going to have any of that shit.”

“I agree,” Dad says, “but she’s on a bingo cruise, so Irena will be by herself. I don’t think it’s an unreasonable request to have some squad cars—including yours—make the rounds a few times a day and over the course of the night. It’s not like she’s requested a bodyguard.”

A flash goes through me, imagining what *that* detail might be like.

I’ve held a torch for Irena, as the old saying goes, since high school. Specifically since tenth-grade biology, when we were lab partners. I remember her as being popular—a varsity cheerleader even as a freshman, in drama club, the multicultural club. But she was also quiet too. She didn’t thrive on her popularity, hardly seemed to notice it.

We saw each other a few times over the rest of high school, then she split for LA while I went to the university, then the police academy. I’ve seen a few episodes of the show she’s on—a cozy mystery, armchair-detective type show. My mom loves it. I find the writing to be lacking, but Irena does a fantastic job.

After I get a few more details from my dad about when she’s expected to be in town, I head back to my desk. Trevor’s on the phone, so I log into my computer and do a search for Irena’s name, curious about this “trouble” she’s dealing with.

I don’t have to search that hard to find it.

The first website that comes up is a popular gossip site that has a rep for being accurate more than not. There's a large photo of a woman with dark blonde hair locked in an embrace with a suited man. It looks like they might be at a party or a club. The woman's face is mostly obscured by the man whose arms are locked around her.

My upper lip curls as I read the headline: *Popular Actress Accused of Seducing Married Producer.*

A huge pang of disappointment hits my gut. Could the quiet, sweet girl I've loved since high school really have changed so much?

Carrying that torch for her all these years has been exhausting. I know it's stupid, to harbor feelings for someone for so long when they've likely gone through half a dozen personality iterations since then. But no woman has ever measured up to Irena, and it has nothing to do with her star power.

I study the photo, read the headline one more time, then close out of the browser.

Maybe it's time to set that torch down now. It seems like the girl I knew is gone for good.



*Irena Mathison*

“ARE YOU ALL SETTLED?” Grandma asks. “Did you find the towels? Do you know how to work the security alarm?”

I wince, holding my cell phone away from my ear slightly. The ship Grandma’s on must be party central, because I can hear music in the background, and Grandma is shouting over it to talk to me.

“Yes, Grandma,” I yell back. “I’m good.”

Even the din in the background can’t mask the huge sigh she heaves. “Are you *really*?”

I swallow, the knot of dread that’s been filling my stomach since I left LA pulling tighter. I can’t think of another time I’ve been so stressed...or outraged. “I...don’t know right now.”

“Hold on.” There’s a pause, then the music suddenly fades away. “I stepped into the bathroom. Listen, Rena, I know you didn’t do what that filthy gossip rag said you did. I know your mother—and I—raised you better than that.”

I swallow the urge to burst into tears, relying on the rage that’s been burning inside me ever since the story broke to dam them. “You did, and I *didn’t*. I would never mess with a married man...or any man in Hollywood, to be honest!”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

I pull a chair out at the small, square wooden kitchen table and collapse into it. I wish Grandma were here, but just being

in her home, a place where I spent a lot of my happy childhood and made wonderful memories, helps soothe me.

“You know how I’ve been talking for a while now about writing my show,” I begin.

“Yes, and that’s exactly what you need to do,” Grandma says firmly. “You have amazing ideas.”

I smile in spite of myself. “Thanks. Anyhow, a producer who works on a lot of successful TV shows in the genre I want to write in was supposed to be at this party that I was appearing at. I thought it’d be a great way to pitch my idea to him, get to know him. Well... He turned out to be a sleaze. Said he’d be glad to help me out if I wanted to work out an *agreement*.”

“Scumbag,” Grandma mutters.

“I knew he was married, and I told him—excuse my French, Grandma.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, sweetpea,” she says tersely. “Tell me what you said to him.”

My cheeks heat. “I said I don’t fuck for parts *or* writing opportunities, and definitely not with a married man.”

“Good girl. I’m very proud of you.”

Her praise makes me glow, but only briefly. “Yeah, well, then he grabbed me and said he loves a woman who plays hard to get, and that’s when the cameras started snapping. I tried to push him off me, but it was too late. And by the next day, I was labeled a homewrecker.” I shake my hands, clenching my fists. “I’m so angry!”

“You have a right to be, Rena. What’s your publicist doing to handle this?”

I shrug miserably, even though she can’t see me. “She said she’s looking into some things and sent me here—but not before the paparazzi found out about my plans. I have a feeling the press will be knocking on your door any time.”

“You do remember where I keep the pellet gun, don’t you?”

I laugh. “Grandma, I’m not shooting anybody. And neither should you!”

Suddenly, there’s a knock on the door, and I freeze. *The press?*

“Grandma, there’s someone at the door,” I say hurriedly. “I’ve got to go.”

She says goodbye and demands I call her later. I hang up and creep toward the door as the knock sounds again.

It’s stupid, but I think of what my character, Aubrey Bradley, would do on my show. I play a plucky baker who solves the murder mysteries she’s always stumbling upon. I’ve done scenes where I’m approaching a door with someone on the other side a million times.

*Keep your weight balanced on the balls of your feet. Angle your body. Don’t stand in front of the window!*

Grandma has a peephole in her door, and I peer through it. A young man stands on the other side, but I can’t clearly make out his features. I know from experience the paps come in all shapes, sizes, and ages.

The person knocks again. “Miss Mathison? It’s Officer Reeves from Magnolia Mountain PD.”

Officer...Reeves? The cops are here?

Cautiously, I undo the locks and crack open the door. Indeed, there’s a cop standing on the porch, and as his brown eyes meet mine, I’m struck with a dual sensation of attraction and recognition. This guy is *gorgeous*, with military-style light brown hair, a chiseled jaw, and dark, sensitive eyes.

But he’s also familiar.

A memory flashes through my brain, of tenth grade biology. My lab partner. To the moment when we stayed after school so he could help me understand our homework. When we were packing up our books, and I met his gaze shyly and said thank you. How I seemed to drown in his eyes as he gazed back and said he was happy to help.

How we almost kissed, but someone burst loudly into the library at that moment.

I shake myself, returning to the present. “Jared? Jared Reeves?”

One brow lifts. “You remember me?”

“Of course,” I blurt. “You were my lab partner sophomore year. And then we had...literature? I think? In junior year.”

He nods, one corner of his mouth tilting up. “Yeah. Then American History senior year.”

“Yes.” I nod. “I remember. Wow, you’re a cop now?” Stupid question—obviously he’s a cop now.

“For a few years now.”

I step back, holding open the door. “Come on in.”

He steps inside the foyer. I forgot how tall he was, a few inches over six feet. He towers over my five-five frame. And, as my eyes go over him, he fills out that uniform very nicely.

“I won’t take up too much of your time,” he says quietly. “The department has been alerted that you’re concerned about media having followed you here and potentially harassing you.”

“Alerted?” I repeat.

“Your grandmother called yesterday.”

I roll my eyes. “Figures.”

“Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you got settled all right, and to let you know you should see a squad car drive by several times a day,” Jared continues. “We’ll also be by during the night as well.”

“Thank you,” I say gratefully. “You don’t need to go out of your way, though. I know you have better things to do. Besides, the whole situation—” I break off.

“That’s none of my business,” he says, averting his gaze.

My heart sinks. Does he know? Does he believe the things the press is saying about me?

“Well, that’s all,” Jared says, backing up. Then he fishes a business card out of his breast pocket. “Here. If you need anything, notice anything strange, feel free to give me a call.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the card. “Um—how have you been?”

He pauses opening the door, glancing at me over his shoulder. He seems to be trying to decide how to answer.

“Just fine, thank you,” he says finally, and steps out the door.

*Jared*

“AUNT MAE,” I say reprovably, slamming the door of my cruiser, a bag of groceries in one arm. “You know better than that.”

My great-aunt, who’s wearing a boot on one foot and a sheepish—and bullheaded—expression on her face, rocks in her front porch rocker. “Well, Jared, when have you ever known me to sit down and wait for something to get done? I needed the gutter fixed, so I hauled my ass up there and fixed it.”

“And then lost your grip *sliding off the edge of the roof*,” I add. “And sprained the everloving hell out of your ankle. Aunt Mae, you’re seventy-one. It’s okay to call for help.”

She rolls her eyes a little, but accepts my kiss on her cheek. “I’ll keep that in mind next time. You can send your cute coworkers out here to *tend* to me.”

She cackles, and I groan. “Aunt Mae, please.”

Aunt Mae motions for me to help her stand, and I follow her inside, toting her groceries. Today’s my day off, and it couldn’t have come a moment too soon. The past three days, since Irena has been in town, I’ve been cruising past her grandmother’s place, catching glimpses of her there and in town. It’s torture, because I want to talk to her, to be around her, to remember who she once was...not this person she’s become.

“I’m making my fried chicken for dinner later,” Aunt Mae says, taking the bag from me and unloading the groceries. “With my special gravy. You and your daddy come and eat.”

“You know Pop’s working,” I tell her, patting my stomach. “But I’m not. I’ll be here!”

“Oh.” Aunt Mae snaps her fingers, like she’s just remembered something. “And Viv Mathison’s granddaughter. You know, with the TV show. Isn’t she back in town?”

Aunt Mae’s performance is nearly flawless—the well-timed snap, the wave of her index finger in the air, the guileless, curious, “oh shoot!” tone. But none of those things can manipulate the mischievous sparkle out of her cornflower-blue eyes.

“Uh-huh,” I say, folding my arms.

“I remember you two were close in high school. Why don’t you ask her over too?”

“Aunt Mae,” I say warningly.

“Well, hell, Jared, I reckon this is my house and I can invite over anyone I want,” she says, patting my cheek. “And besides, Viv is a good friend of mine, and she asked me to keep an eye on Rena.”

“Uh-huh. So you knew good and darn well she’s back in town.”

“Eh.” Aunt Mae shrugs dismissively. “Why don’t you go over and tell her six o’clock.”

I sigh. “There’s this thing called a phone—”

“See, that’s what’s wrong with you,” Aunt Mae says loudly, jabbing a bunch of celery at me. “What’s wrong with your whole generation. You don’t know shit about the art of courting a girl anymore. In my day, a young man would come over to the house and ask my *father* if he could court me, like a proper young gentlemen. These days, you hooligans just want to send sexting and dick pics like you ain’t had no home training.”

“Aunt Mae!” I exclaim. “First of all, how do *you* know about dick pics? Wait—don’t answer that. For the love of God. Besides, Irena Mathison isn’t the same girl she used to be. Any news outlet will tell you that.”

“I talked to Viv. She told me about that mess.”

I shrugged. “Not exactly the kind of girl who comes to a nice family dinner.”

Aunt Mae props a fist on her hip, leaning against the kitchen counter. Her stare makes me fidget, like I’m ten years old all over again and got caught practicing my slingshot aim against the side of the house. “Since when do *you* believe everything you hear?”

“I didn’t just hear it,” I reply. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Or maybe you’re just a lunkhead who can’t see past his own foolishness, believing a gossip rag. You’re a cop, Jared. You know better than most to believe half of what you see and none of what you hear. Invite that girl.” Now Aunt Mae threatens me with carrots. “You gonna make me tell you again?”

Aunt Mae can be irritatingly wise—irritating because it usually makes me face my own, in her words, foolishness. “No, ma’am.”

“Good. And take this with you.” She hands me a loaf of her glazed lemon poppyseed bread. “Don’t you go over to a girl’s house emptyhanded.”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a chuckle, I turn toward the door.

But on the way out, my good mood slips a little. Aunt Mae is a trip, but now, I have to go invite Irena Mathison to *dinner*...face to face. I consider texting her anyway and keeping the lemon poppyseed bread for myself, but I have a feeling Aunt Mae will know my sin the second she lays eyes on me.

Besides, knowing her, she’ll probably call Irena and let her know I’m coming.



*Irena*

I'M OUTSIDE, elbow deep in dirt, when I hear the phone ring inside the house. I debate going to get it, but I decide I'll check for messages when I'm done planting. The noise takes me back for a moment, since I forgot Grandma still has a landline she actively uses.

Her garden was looking a little sad, and yesterday when we talked she mentioned wanting to spruce it up, so I went over to the nursery in town and picked up half a dozen flowering plants to put in for her. She taught me about gardening, and that's one thing I really miss about living in LA—I live in a high-rise condo and don't really have the space or time to plant and tend to pretty things.

Working with my hands in the hot sun, sweating, and getting messy has my heart lighter than it's been in days. I lose myself in the manual labor, focusing on my work one task at a time.

In fact, I'm so lost in my work, I barely register the sound of tire tracks on Grandma's gravel drive until it's too late.

My heart leaps into my throat. *The press?*

Distantly, I hear the sound of the doorbell chiming gently through the house. I sit back on my heels, debating on what to do, then strip off my work gloves and charge toward the front of the house. A surge of fury rises in me. I get everyone has a job to do, but *no one* is allowed to just show up at my grandmother's house like this.

I jog the last few feet, whipping around the corner of the house, then come skidding to a stop.

It's not the press, but Officer Jared Reeves—not in uniform today. He's wearing jeans and a plain black V-neck T-shirt that clings to his lean body and well-developed muscles. He holds a little foil-wrapped bundle in one hand.

All the rage seeps out of me, replaced by relief that it's not the press, confusion as to why he's here...and a strong surge of attraction that leaves me breathless and lightheaded.

"Hey," he says, his gaze going over me.

I realize I must look like a mess, in frayed denim cutoffs, a battered white T-shirt with the sleeves and sides cut off, and a bikini top underneath. Then there's the sweat and dirt covering every inch of my skin, and I'm sure my ponytail has all manner of crap in it. I was trying to stay cool, but now I think I look like I fell off a dump truck.

"Hey," I reply. "I'm glad to see you. I—thought you were someone else."

He nods, a look of understanding on his face. "Have you seen them?"

I shake my head. "If they're even here. But no. I see your squad cars frequently, though. So thank you."

He nods. "Sorry to interrupt. You look like you were in the middle of something."

I chuckle, trying in vain to brush the caked dirt off my arms. "I was planting some stuff for Grandma out back."

"Nice. Need a hand?"

I wave dismissively. "I'm about done, but thank you. Just have to do a little more packing then water."

Jared smiles slightly. "Seems like it's work you enjoy."

I nod. "I missed it, actually. Being home...has been good for me."

He meets my gaze, and we're both silent as we hold each other's stare.

Then he seems to remember why he came to visit. “Uh, sorry. Here. From my Aunt Mae.” He hands me the little bundle. “Lemon poppyseed bread.”

I smile, pulling back a corner of the foil. Immediately the smell of sugar and lemon hits me. “Wow, yum. Hey, let me clean up a little and we can have some.”

I duck inside the house and wash my hands at the kitchen sink, then open the package. I slice half of it and put it on a plate, then find some fresh, ice-cold lemonade in the fridge and pour two glasses. I put it all on a distressed, white wooden tray and take it out to the porch, where Jared is sprawled on the rocker. He scoots to one side as I sit beside him and hand him a sweating glass.

Thirsty, I drain my entire glass in less than a minute. Then I reach for a slice of bread.

“Mmm.” I shake my head, savoring the flavor. “Delicious.” I spray little crumbs, then laugh, clapping a hand over my mouth.

LA Irena would never. I picture doing the same thing at a chic sushi restaurant with industry people, and laugh harder.

Jared smiles, shaking his head. “Say it, don’t spray it.”

“I was just picturing the looks on the faces of hoity-toity industry people, if I sprayed my food at a fancy meal.”

He lifts his brows. “Well, you’re kinda one of those hoity-toity industry people now, aren’t you?”

That sobers me up. I glance down at my lap. “I guess that’s the life I’ve been living. But being home has reminded me where I came from. Who I am.”

Jared nods slowly, and I wonder if he’s thinking about that awful press story.

“Do you know what’s going on?” I ask. “With me?”

He shrugs, breaking off a crust of the bread and popping it in his mouth. “Heard some things. It’s not really my business.”

“There are two sides to every story,” I tell him. “If you have some time, I’d like to tell you mine.”

Jared nods and faces me, his warm brown eyes serene but intense. “Go on.”

I tell him the whole sordid story, gauging his expression for disbelief or doubt. What I see is compassion...and maybe something that looks like relief.

“I’m sorry that happened, Irena,” he says, then scrubs the back of his neck. “Look, I think I owe you an apology.”

I lift my brows. “Apologize? For what?”

“Well, I’d heard a little of what had happened, and...”

“You believed it,” I finish.

“It’s been so many years since you’ve been home,” he says quietly, meeting my gaze. “So many years since I’ve known you. I guess...yeah. I believed it. And I’m sorry. Not only was I wrong, but you were the victim here.”

I nod slowly. “I don’t blame you for believing it. The media painted it to be believed.”

“So what happens now?”

I shrug. “My publicist is trying to make things right. This is the kind of thing that could follow me for years. And then that TV show idea I’ve been working on will never see the light.”

“That’s bullshit!”

The vehemence in his voice makes me smile. “I know. But that’s how it goes.”

He pauses. “Well, listen. Aunt Mae’s whipping up her famous fried chicken tonight. And she promised your grandma she’d look after you, so I guess you better plan on coming over to eat.”

I brighten. “Is that an invitation, Officer Reeves?”

He smirks. “I suppose my delivery could use some work, but yes. That’s an invitation.”

“Then I’ll be there,” I reply. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t I, uh, come back and pick you up?” he asks, glancing at his watch. “We’re eating at six. Gives you time to finish up what you’re doing out back.”

“Sure,” I say, my heart suddenly pounding. “That sounds perfect.”

*Just perfect.*

*Jared*

SMILING, I watch Irena swipe the last bite of a buttermilk biscuit across her plate to sop up the last of Aunt Mae's peppercorn gravy and pop it into her mouth with a satisfied sigh.

"Get enough?" Aunt Mae asks, and I can tell she's pleased that the meal went over so well.

Irena laughs, patting her stomach. "I think so. I haven't had a meal this good in so long."

"What do they feed you out there in Los Angeles?"

"Boiled fish and lettuce," Irena says with a dark chuckle.

Aunt Mae shudders. "Blech." She gets up and starts clearing the table. Both Irena and I move to help her.

"You know," Aunt Mae says, glancing out the kitchen window. "It's a beautiful night. Look at all those stars. Why don't you two go for a walk? The peach cobbler needs thirty minutes to heat up at least. By the time you come back, it'll be all set."

I glance at Irena. "How about it?"

She fixes me with a wide smile. "Yes, I'd love to."

Aunt Mae bustles around the kitchen, pausing just long enough to say, "There's a clean blanket in the hall closet. If you, you know, want to sit under the stars."

Irena giggles. I smirk. Aunt Mae's a meddler...but she does have good advice.

I find the blanket in the closet, and Irena and I head outside. It's a balmy evening with a gentle breeze—indeed, it is perfect for a starlit stroll.

Irena's hand finds mine, and I turn to her, surprised at the intimacy of the gesture.

“Is it all right?” she asks quietly, gazing up at me.

*Are you kidding me?* “Yes,” I murmur. “It's definitely all right.”

She sighs happily. “Aunt Mae was right. This is the perfect night.” She glances at me from under her lashes. “Even though I think she just wanted us to be alone together. What do you think?”

I grin into the velvety darkness. “I think you're right about that.”

“I'm surprised you haven't settled down, Jared,” Irena says. “You know, the wife and kid thing.”

“That's the plan someday,” I say, shrugging. “Just haven't found the right woman yet. Problem with living in a relatively small town—you know everyone.”

“I'm surprised you never left.”

Her hand is so soft, warm in mine. Our fingers intertwine like they were molded just for each other. “I thought about it. I went to school in the city. Went to the academy there too, but...I guess the pull of home is strong for some of us.”

Irena's so quiet, I nudge her with my elbow. “Of course, sometimes a place is too small to contain a person. You were always meant for more, Irena.”

She stops in her tracks, whirling to face me. The pretty pink lace sundress she wears twirls with her sudden movement.

“Talk about a pull,” she says, her voice thick with passion. “I know what I want to do with my life—I want to create art.”

Art in the form of great TV. But...the LA life isn't for me. I never *really* wanted to be an actress. It was a means into the industry. A way to learn the ropes. It was fun for a while, but now..."

"You can't let one bad experience turn you away from something you're meant to do," I tell her. "I've seen a few episodes of your show. Aunt Mae watches it religiously. Irena, you're *gifted*. You can't just let that go."

She smiles a little. "Thank you. And thanks to Aunt Mae, too. It just...it doesn't make me as happy as I think it should. And it hasn't for a while, even before the scandal broke. I know it seems like a lot of fun to most people, and sometimes, it is. But it's also terribly cutthroat, really competitive, and dark. Sometimes, it's just *so fucking dark*."

Irena flings out her arms. "I...I want it both ways. I want the comfort of my small-town life back. I want the familiarity. I want to spend my Sundays working on my garden in the hot sun, then sitting on the front porch at dusk with lemonade, listening to nature and smelling the magnolia trees in the air. I want to write a hit TV show, several hit TV shows, and I want to bring my art into people's homes every week, let them escape for an hour."

I step closer. "Who says you can't have it all?"

"The industry," she says helplessly.

"Then you change it," I say tersely. "You *change* it. You do things your way, on your terms. Not everyone's going to like it, no. Not everyone's going to support you. But someone will. Someone's going to like what you're cooking a hell of a lot, and they're going to want it. And they'll work with you."

"You think so?"

I take her hand again. "I *know* so. I feel it, Irena. You're special. You've always been special. Even when we were lab partners, and I had a terrible crush on you, so strong I could hardly speak around you."

Her eyes widen. The moonlight hits them, making them glow up at me, and for a second I forget my own name. "Do



you remember that day in the library?”

Instantly, my mind flies back to a late, rainy afternoon in the high school library, where a young Jared helped a young Irena with her biology homework ahead of a big test. We'd been there for a couple hours, and when she thanked me for helping her, our gazes locked...and we couldn't look away. I remember how I leaned closer and closer to her, my heart pounding when I realized she was doing the same. But before our lips could meet, a couple of football players burst into the library, laughing loudly and joking with each other, breaking our spell.

“Yes,” I say hoarsely. “I think about that day...more than I should, probably.” I veer off the walking path and head into the tall, soft grass.

“Why do you say that?”

It's my turn to whirl around. “That was a long time ago, Irena. A very long time ago. And...nothing happened. Any sane man would just move on and not—”

Irena takes a step toward me. “Not what?”

“Not spend all this time wishing things had been different. Wishing they could be different. When they can't.”

“Why can't they?”

Before I can move, Irena slides into my arms, her skin warm against mine, and captures my lips with hers.

*Irena*

JARED STIFFENS WITH SURPRISE, but only for a moment. In the next breath, he slips his arms around me, giving into me and kissing back.

Shooting stars explode behind my eyelids. I have major regrets about not working up the courage to kiss him that day in the library, but this moment, *this* moment, makes it all worth it.

His hands slide under the curtain of my hair, cupping my jaws, his thumbs gliding over my cheeks. He quickly takes control, and I happily relinquish it to him. His lips move slowly over mine, as if we have the entire night ahead of us, before parting them to take my mouth more deeply. His tongue strokes mine, and an incendiary blaze ignites inside me.

“Lay me down?” I murmur against his lips.

His mouth brushes my cheek, then the pulse point under my jaw, which I’m sure is flying. He steps away only to unfurl the blanket his genius aunt recommended we take along—to “sit and watch the stars,” yeah, right, Aunt Mae—then reaches for my hand and gently tugs me down.

“You’re so beautiful, Rena,” he whispers in the dark, and despite the slightly humid night, I shiver. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”

“I have too.” I slide a hand up his chest, pausing to brush his cheek. “Jared, I’ve never stopped thinking about you. Not once. I always thought you were just that guy who got away,

but now I know you've always meant something so much more." I raise myself to kneel between his open legs, and reach for the straps on my pink sundress. "I want to show you how much you've meant."

A smile curls his lips. "Out here?"

I lean forward, my lips brushing his. "It's just us, isn't it? Just us and the stars."

He kisses me back. "Then show me."

I straighten and slowly lower first one spaghetti strap, then the other, tugging down the front of the dress to reveal my white, strapless lace bra. Jared slides his hands under the skirt of my dress. They're so warm against my thighs and hips, and I shiver when they graze and squeeze my ass.

I straddle his hips and slowly pull the bra off. The night breeze kisses my breasts and immediately makes my nipples hard. Jared wastes no time by dipping his head to catch one in his mouth. He teases and teases it with his warm mouth. I tip my head back and let out a soft moan.

Beneath me, I feel him harden, and I can't help grinding against him. One of his hands glides up my thigh and hooks into the crotch of my lace panties, tugging them aside. A moment later, his fingers brush against me, and he moans against my lips.

"So wet," he whispers, stroking me. Then I feel one part me, and I gasp, squeezing around his finger.

"You feel so good," he continues, nibbling my lip, working first one, then another finger inside me.

I can't help myself from riding his fingers. "Jared, I'm going to—to—" I can't even get the word out before my climax rips through me.

Jared's eyes are hooded with lust as he slowly pulls his fingers out of me. "I need you right now, babe. But...I don't have any condoms."

"It's okay with me if it's okay with you," I tell him. "I haven't been with anyone in so long, Jared, and not since my

last test.”

“I haven’t been with anyone either,” he promises. “Are you sure you’re comfortable with this?”

I tilt my forehead to his. “I am. I trust you.”

I help him lower his jeans as he strips off his T-shirt. His body is a gorgeous sculpture, each muscle hewn as if from stone. I run my fingers along the feathers of his ribs, framing the perfect squares of muscle that make up his abs. He pulls me on top of him again, slides his hands under my skirt, and pulls me down on him.

This time, his long, thick cock stretches me as I slide down, and I let out another sharp gasp. “You’re huge.”

He halts, breathing hard, hands on my thighs. “Are you okay? Want to stop?”

“No.” I brace my hands on his chest and work my hips a little more slowly. “No, this is perfect.”

“You’re perfect,” he shoots back, grasping my hips. “So wet and tight. So beautiful.” He reaches up to cup my breasts and pull them toward his mouth. I lean over him, riding him with slow, deep grinds, enjoying the sensation of him filling me while his warm tongue laps at my nipples.

As I start to build toward another shattering climax, Jared gently pulls me off him, moving me to my back.

“I’ll have peaches and cream for dessert one way or another,” he murmurs, spreading my thighs and kneeling between them.

My back arches off the soft blanket at the first touch of his tongue. He laps at my engorged pussy with his warm, clever tongue, over and over, until all the stars swirl overhead and my eyes roll back as my orgasm erupts inside me. I moan his name to the heavens as he slides up my body and reenters me, then thrusts into me with power and intent.

He’s in control now. He’s the one doing the claiming...and I’m reveling in it.

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close as the sounds of flesh meeting flesh, over and over, fill the night sky along with our heavy pants and the wet smack of our lips as they meet and re-meet.

Suddenly he stops, staring down at me. "I'm about to come, Rena. Let me pull out."

I hug him with my knees. "No. I want you to come inside me, Jared. Make me yours."

He groans, fighting a losing battle against himself, and plunges in and out of me. My third orgasm of the night explodes inside me just as his claims him, and we come together, straining against each other, gripping each other tight.

It takes a moment to catch our breath.

"I could stay out here all night," I murmur into his shoulder. "Forever."

"Me, too." Jared kisses my forehead. "But I don't want you getting chewed on by bugs. Why don't I give you a ride home?"

"Only if you'll stay," I whisper.

He grins and kisses me again. This time, on my lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

*Jared*

THE NEXT MORNING, the smell of freshly brewed coffee pulls me from a restful sleep. I reach over, aware I'm not in my bed in my house.

I'm in Irena's bed—or rather, her grandmother's guestroom bed.

But she's gone, though her side is still warm, suggesting she didn't leave it too long ago.

I sit up, yawning deeply, rubbing my eyes. In addition to the smell of coffee, I hear music playing—soft, instrumental music that sounds like something from the *Game of Thrones* soundtrack.

Puzzled, I find my jeans on the floor and pull them on. After we left the field, we snuck back to Aunt Mae's house. The lights were off downstairs. I spotted the one in her bedroom on upstairs, suggesting she was enjoying her nightly habit of having tea in bed while reading a book. I could only picture the smirk on her face.

The pan with peach cobbler was wrapped in aluminum foil with a note on top: *Take it with you. Goodnight, lovebirds.*

It made me wonder just *how* much Aunt Mae knew about what happened in those tall grasses.

However, Irena and I got a little...distracted once we made it back to the house, and the peach cobbler never got tasted. Well, not the one my aunt made for us, anyway. The treat

between Irena's thighs, on the other hand, got eaten several times over.

The thought of it is enough to get me hard right now, but first, I want to know where Irena's gone.

Out in the kitchen, dressed in a T-shirt and boxer shorts, typing furiously on her computer, sits Irena. Her blonde hair is disheveled, but the sun beams in through the window behind her, making her look like an angel.

I smile at her. "What're you doing up?"

She looks up at me. "Jared! You won't believe this." She beckons me to come closer. "I got up early to work on my script—I got ten pages written."

I kiss the top of her head. "Look at you. I'm so proud of you."

Irena beams up at me. "Thanks. But that's not the amazing part. Look at what my publicist just sent me."

She clicks around her email for a moment, then a somewhat grainy but still distinguishable cell phone video pops up. I realize it's from the same night that her picture was taken with that man—except it's from a different angle, and as I watch triumphantly, it shows the *real* story.

Fury rises as I watch the man grab Irena's arm and pull her close, laughing. He says something into her ear, and she tries to shove against him. He frowns at her, says something else, then stumbles back when she shoves his shoulder again—hard. Then Irena in the video hurls what I imagine to be some rather choice words at him before stalking away.

"It is amazing," I say between my teeth, "how just one second in time can tell an entirely different story. A lie, when the truth was there all along."

Irena draws a deep breath through her nose, gazing steadily at the screen. "This is going out to the major news outlets as we speak. And I'm going to be talking to my lawyer about sexual harassment charges. I don't expect them to stick. Who knows. But I want this man and any others like him to know—sometimes they mess with the wrong one."

I pull her into my arms. “Goddamn right, they did.” I hug her hard. “I...guess this means you’ll be heading back to LA soon, then?”

Irena leans back in my arms, smiling up at me. “I don’t know about that, actually. I’m very happy right here in Magnolia Mountain.” She tips her head at the laptop. “I’m staying at least long enough to finish my script. Then we’ll see what happens after that.”

I draw a deep breath. “Can I be selfish for a moment?”

She cups my face. “Of course.”

“I don’t want you to go.” I tick my chin at her computer. “But I want that to be as successful as you want it to be, and I can’t see how that’s possible from here.”

Irena smiles. “Weren’t you the one who said last night that I can have it all? Are you having a change of heart?”

“No.” I shake my head. “The opposite, I think. I want you to be happy and chase your dreams. No, *live* your dreams.”

Irena drapes her arms over my shoulders. “And how do you know those dreams don’t include you?”

I place my hands on her hips. “Do they?”

She nods. “There’s something I want to do today. And I’d like you to come with me, if you can.”

“I have to report to work at three, but I’m all yours until then. What did you have in mind?”

“You know that old house on Grandview Road?”

I crinkle my brow. “The one that just went up for sale?”

She nods. “I want to look around. I think...I want to buy it.”

My brows shoot up. She’s talking about the sprawling three-story house that takes up an entire cul-de-sac, with acres of land spreading behind it. The house itself hasn’t been lived in for several years now. I’ve actually had to clear high school parties out of it a time or two.



“That place? It needs a ton of work.”

She nods, delighted. “I know. Isn’t it wonderful? I’d love to take that place and fix it up the way I want. Turn the third floor into a writing office. Redo the kitchen. Bring everything up to date. Maybe even have a couple of horses one day. Some chickens.”

I nod slowly. The way her eyes sparkle tells me this has been on her mind for a while, and that it’s something that would bring her absolute joy. “Then we better get over there and look at it.”

She leans against me, pressing up on tiptoe for a kiss. But before our lips meet, there’s a knock on the front door.

“Miss Mathison? Are you in there? Miss Mathison, we’d just like to get a quick statement from you if we could.”

Irena and I stare at each other, then turn for the door. Outside, a small group of who I can only assume are paparazzi stand outside, most holding cell phones up, aimed at the house.

Irena pulls the door open slightly, concealing me behind it. “Well, hello,” she says tiredly. “What a *surprise* to see you all here.”

“We just wanted to get a statement regarding the breaking news,” one of the journalists says. “A video has come to light that is very incriminating for the other party, and clearly paints you in an innocent light. Do you have anything to say?”

Irena stands there quiet for a moment, not at all ashamed of her messy hair or her baggy T-shirt and little boxer shorts. “What I have to say is that this will be just one more situation where one snapshot in time seems to tell a story, but it’s the wrong story. That none of us should be so quick to judge without knowing the full story. But I know that won’t happen. I know this won’t end with me. I’d gladly go through this again if it would, but it won’t. At this point, I’d just like to enjoy my time here at home with the rest of my dignity, and I hope the other party can do the same...because that’s all about to change for him.”

Some of the journalists applaud her.

“Now, I know you’ve all come a long way for my statement, but if you don’t mind, I’d appreciate having my privacy respected,” Irena finishes firmly. “I’ve been working closely with local law enforcement to ensure that happens.”

“What’s that mean?” one of the reporters asks. “You have a bodyguard?”

Irena glances over at me, takes in my shirtless form, and one side of her mouth curls up. A devilish twinkle fills her eyes, and she slowly opens the door the rest of the way. I step in behind her, sliding an arm around her waist.

The cameras all swivel to me.

“Yes,” she says. “You could say that.”

“Hey, Officer Hottie!” a reporter calls. “What exactly are you doing to keep Miss Mathison safe?”

I glance at them, then at Irena. I lean and press a long, slow kiss to her lips, and the reporters go nuts.

“That’s classified,” I reply, and Irena shuts the door on them.

# EPILOGUE

*Irena*

*Five years later*

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT floods in through my open third floor, but I've already been up for hours.

Before dawn, I crept out of bed to start the coffee, then snuck up here to finish working on the fourth season finale of *A Queen's Vengeance*, the medieval thriller I've been writing that's a smashing success on HBO. I love every moment of writing this show, and I love that the characters I've created—strong, flawed, courageous—have been so well received by the public. It especially makes my heart fly with joy to know that my main character, the young Queen Rydla, has become a hero for so many young women, who admire her bravery and her intelligence and her story arc. I set out to write the hero I wanted to see, and sometimes, it makes me weep with joy to know that she's a hero for the masses, not just me.

When I bought the Grandview house, I gutted it in a major way and started rebuilding and designing from the ground up. Gone went the old dark wood accents and flooring. Off came the awful, yellowy green seventies wallpaper. I installed pale, ash-brown, matte wood floors. I covered the walls in a warm, creamy gray paint. The kitchen, previously a dark cave, became white and bright, with glass tile backsplash and minimalist metallic touches. And best of all, I knocked down all the walls on the third floor to create one large workspace. My writing desk sits against the side of the room that has the most sunlight. The other side of the room is a reading nook—

my other passion. Built-in book shelves line one wall and contains my ever-growing collection. There's a small fireplace on one side, and I've also set up a small coffee bar up here—and, for late night inspiration, a small wet bar, too.

I built myself the house of my dreams—but it didn't become a home until I filled it with one more thing.

One more thing that became *three* more things.

Ritzi the mutt eyes me from where he's curled up in his cushy dog bed. Pretty soon it'll be time for our long morning walk.

There's a knock on the door. "Time for breakfast."

I lean back in my chair and smile as my sweet husband, Magnolia Mount PD's finest, carries in a plate. "What did I do to earn breakfast up here?"

Jared smiles at me. "It's a bribe. You finished the season finale, right?"

Grinning, I point to the laptop screen, where the two best words any writer can write blaze back at him: **THE END**.

"Hell yeah!" He sets down the plate and sweeps me into his arms for a congratulatory kiss. I melt into his arms, but catch myself before I get too carried away. Since his father's joyous retirement a few years ago, Jared has taken over as chief of police, and that means he's pressed and dressed early in the morning now. No more rolling in in the afternoon.

"I'm so proud of you," he says, squeezing me. "Now. When do I get to read it?"

"When the closed captioning comes on the TV screen when the season airs," I shoot back with a grin.

He shakes his head. "That's not fair. You ended season three on a cliffhanger. I *need* to know what happens to Rydla and Verek."

I giggle and scoop up my plate. A thick Belgian waffle rests in a heavy drizzle of syrup, and cheesy eggs, hash browns, and two sausage links round out the rest of the meal. "Keep this up, and I might make an exception."

Jared eyes me. “I have to go to work, but this isn’t over.”

I lick syrup off the tines of my fork and eye him seductively. “You bet it isn’t.”

He opens his mouth to respond in kind, but then a little cry from the baby monitor on my desk sounds. Ritzi rises with a *woof*.

“That’s my cue,” I say, wolfing my breakfast faster. “Time to get the monster up, then we’re all going for our walk.”

“Be careful,” Jared say, leaning down to kiss me again. “I’ll call you later, baby.”

“Okay. I love you. Thanks for breakfast!” I yell as he dashes down the stairs.

I carry my empty plate down to the kitchen, then turn and jog right back up the stairs to the second floor to JJ’s room. My two-year-old stands, gripping the side of his crib, staring at me with a huge smile on his face.

“JJ!” I squeal, rushing over and scooping him up. “Good morning!”

He mimics my squeal, giggling.

I clean him and change him, then whisk him downstairs for breakfast, Ritzi on our heels. After I feed JJ, I load him up in my jogging stroller. I’m still full from the indulgent breakfast Jared made me, so it’ll just be a walk today.

That’s okay—the slower pace gives me the opportunity to breathe and appreciate the beautiful life I’ve been blessed with.

Leaving the show a year after I came back home was a hard choice but the right one for me to make. My new TV show got picked up immediately, and I worked out a deal to have the network fly me back and forth as needed for press and table reads. I’ve even directed a couple of episodes.

It all affords me the ability to live up in the mountains, back home, where I can be the down-home girl I always was—with the boy next door at her side.

## The End

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