



MASON'S WATCH



TEAM WATCHDOG

JEN TALTY

MASON'S WATCH
BROTHERHOOD
PROTECTORS WORLD

TEAM WATCHDOG

BOOK ONE



JEN TALTY



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PRAISE FOR JEN TALTY

“*Deadly Secrets* is the best of romance and suspense in one hot read!” *NYT Bestselling Author Jennifer Probst*

“A charming setting and a steamy couple heat up the pages in a suspenseful story I couldn’t put down!” *NY Times and USA Today Bestselling Author Donna Grant*

“Jen Talty’s books will grab your attention and pull you into a world of relatable characters, strong personalities, humor, and believable storylines. You’ll laugh, you’ll cry, and you’ll rush to get the next book she releases!” *Natalie Ann USA Today Bestselling Author*

“I positively loved *In Two Weeks*, and highly recommend it. The writing is wonderful, the story is fantastic, and the characters will keep you coming back for more. I can’t wait to get my hands on future installments of the NYS Troopers series.” *Long and Short Reviews*

“*In Two Weeks* hooks the reader from page one. This is a fast paced story where the development of the romance grabs you emotionally and the suspense keeps you sitting on the edge of your chair. Great characters, great writing, and a believable plot that can be a warning to all of us.” *Desiree Holt, USA Today Bestseller*

“*Dark Water* delivers an engaging portrait of wounded hearts as the memorable characters take you on a healing journey of love. A mysterious death brings danger and intrigue into the drama, while sultry passions brew into a believable plot that melts the reader’s heart. Jen Talty pens an entertaining romance that grips the heart as the colorful and dangerous story unfolds into a chilling ending.” *Night Owl Reviews*

“This is not the typical love story, nor is it the typical mystery. The characters are well rounded and interesting.” *You Gotta Read Reviews*

“*Murder in Paradise Bay* is a fast-paced romantic thriller with plenty of twists and turns to keep you guessing until the end. You won’t want to miss this one...” *USA Today bestselling author Janice Maynard*

For the tres amigos. You rock!

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Brotherhood Protectors Series

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[Bride Protector SEAL \(#2\)](#)

[Montana D-Force \(#3\)](#)

[Cowboy D-Force \(#4\)](#)

[Montana Ranger \(#5\)](#)

[Montana Dog Soldier \(#6\)](#)

[Montana SEAL Daddy \(#7\)](#)

[Montana Ranger's Wedding Vow \(#8\)](#)

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[Montana SEAL Friendly Fire \(#11\)](#)

[Montana SEAL's Mail-Order Bride \(#12\)](#)

[SEAL Justice \(#13\)](#)

[Ranger Creed \(#14\)](#)

[Delta Force Rescue \(#15\)](#)

[Dog Days of Christmas \(#16\)](#)

[Montana Rescue \(#17\)](#)

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BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS WORLD

ORIGINAL SERIES BY ELLE JAMES

Brotherhood Protectors Colorado World

Team Watchdog

Mason's Watch - Jen Talty

Asher's Watch - Leanne Tyler

Cruz's Watch - Stacey Wilk

Kent's Watch - Deanna L. Rowley

Ryder's Watch - Kris Norris

Team Eagle

Booker's Mission - Kris Norris

Hunter's Mission - Kendall Talbot

Gunn's Mission - Delilah Devlin

Xavier's Mission - Lori Matthews

Wyatt's Mission - Jen Talty

Team Raptor

Darius' Promise - Jen Talty

Simon's Promise - Leanne Tyler

Nash's Promise - Stacey Wilk

Spencer's Promise - Deanna L. Rowley

Logan's Promise - Kris Norris

Team Falco

Fighting for Esme - Jen Talty

Fighting for Charli - Leanne Tyler

Fighting for Tessa - Stacey Wilk

Fighting for Kora - Deanna L. Rowley

Fighting for Fiona - Kris Norris

Athena Project

Beck's Six - Desiree Holt

Victoria's Six - Delilah Devlin

Cygnny's Six - Reina Torres

Fay's Six - Jen Talty

Melody's Six - Regan Black

Team Trojan

Defending Sophie - Desiree Holt

Defending Evangeline - Delilah Devlin

Defending Casey - Reina Torres

Defending Sparrow - Jen Talty

Defending Avery - Regan Black

Brotherhood Protectors Yellowstone World

Team Wolf

Guarding Harper - Desiree Holt

Guarding Hannah - Delilah Devlin

Guarding Eris - Reina Torres

Guarding Payton - Jen Talty

Guarding Leah - Regan Black

Brotherhood Protectors Yellowstone World

Team Eagle

Booker's Mission - Kris Norris

Hunter's Mission - Kendall Talbot

Gunn's Mission - Delilah Devlin

Xavier's Mission - Lori Matthews

Wyatt's Mission - Jen Talty

CHAPTER 1



MASON QUINN STOOD outside the conference room with a hockey puck in one hand, and a knee hockey stick in the other. The Brotherhood Protector complex in Fool's Gold, Colorado, was massive and impressive. Nestled in the mountains, in a picturesque town that reminded him of an old western movie, it immediately quieted his soul. He felt closer to the one person whom he missed the most.

His guardian angel.

The complex itself was everything that had been promised, and more. The opportunity to use the skills he'd learn in the military—a career he'd cherished—had come at a time in his life where confusion surrounding what to do next had engulfed his heart. A combination of excitement, fear, and apprehension filled his chest like an elephant taking a seat on it.

Being a leader hadn't been a role that came naturally. It had been forced on him starting at the ripe old age of ten.

It started when he'd been named captain of his hockey team. He never felt it had been deserving. Being the best kid on the hockey team didn't necessarily make for a great leader. But his coaches felt different.

Every single fucking one of them until he went to Canada where he learned a few more life lessons.

A career in the Air Force hadn't been his lifelong ambition, but it had become his fate, and he couldn't imagine doing anything else for the last twenty-something years. The decision to go to the Air Force Academy when his dream of

becoming a star in the NHL had been squelched simply because his talent wasn't as good as every other kid coming out of the junior leagues had been the best thing ever.

However, at every turn, he ended up in the team leader role, which was a responsibility he could live without. He'd hoped that Cruz would have stepped up to the plate when they joined the Brotherhood Protectors, considering his rank had been higher, but no, Cruz agreed the honor should go to Mason. He wanted to argue why it shouldn't be him, but that wasn't in Mason's nature.

And Cruz had a point.

What did it matter? They were still a team.

"What the hell are you doing standing out here like an idiot?" Ryder slapped the back side of his thighs with a knee hockey stick. "Aren't you supposed to be in there giving us our first official briefing? A good old-fashioned pep talk?"

"Hit me with that fucking thing again, and I'll clock you with a puck right between the eyes."

"Aw, come on, man. What's got your panties in a wad? It's just a meeting."

"That's the problem. I suck at this shit. If we were going to be talking about a mission, I'd be okay. But going over paperwork, the rules, the expectations, all that bullshit..." He tossed the hockey puck in the air and tapped it with the back side of the stick, catching it in the palm of his hand. "Cruz is better cut out for this. He was our platoon leader. He can command a room better than I can."

"Why the hell are you worried about this? It's just the five of us."

"And Hank and Jake." Mason rubbed the puck along his side. Hank Patterson, the founder of the Brotherhood Protectors, was an impressive man. So was Jake Cogburn, who ran the Colorado Division. They were seasoned professionals and working for them was an honor. Leaving the military at forty had been a no-brainer. It was a young man's job and his last mission had shown him that he was no longer youthful.

His bones hurt. His muscles ached, and the time it took to bounce back was way too long.

“It’s no different from any other meeting.” Ryder smiled that wicked, ridiculous grin he tended to plaster on his face whenever he tried to get Mason to chill. Half the time it worked.

This, however, was not one of those moments.

Mason was a million miles out of his comfort zone.

“Come on. Team Watchdog is waiting. Besides, I’m sure Cruz is getting tired of entertaining Asher and Kent all by his little lonesome. You know how those two can get during downtime. They have ants in their pants and they don’t share our sense of humor.”

Now that brought a chuckle and a smile. Asher and Kent were good men. He, Cruz, and Ryder had served with them the last few years of their military career. They were loyal men. Men who could be trusted. Men, who in battle, you wanted by your side.

However, they didn’t often get the shared history that *tres amigos* had, only because Mason and Ryder had known each other since they were ten. They had grown up playing hockey together. Cruz came into the picture a few years later, also sharing the passion for hockey, though not quite as intensely as Mason and Ryder. While all five of them had decided to leave the military together and join the Brotherhood Protectors as a secret service type detail, and Mason considered all the men to be his brothers, Cruz and Ryder had been with him from the beginning.

There were there for him when his dream had been crushed. His heart broken. And through the darkest time in his life. They had pulled him from the gutter and kicked his ass back to reality. For that, he’d forever be grateful.

“You go in. I want another minute to collect my thoughts,” Mason said.

“Whatever you need.” Ryder squeezed his shoulder. “But remember what Mary Lou would say in a moment like this.”

He cleared his throat. “Mason, you think too much and that’s always going to get in your way. Trust your instincts. They’re usually right.”

Mason laughed. Only Ryder could bring up his sister like that in a moment like this. Only Ryder knew that deep connection. He understood it better than anyone. “God, I miss her.”

“So do I, man.” Ryder disappeared into the conference room, leaving Mason alone with his thoughts, which weren’t plentiful. He knew what he had to cover. There was a binder full of material sitting at the head of the conference table filled with information. He glanced at his watch. Hank and Jake should be arriving any minute. Time to get the show on the road. He squared his shoulders and headed into the conference room, forcing his award-winning smile and pushing his insecurities to his toes.

This was his team. His responsibility.

Failure wasn’t an option.

“Good morning.” He took his position at the head of the table. Cruz flanked his right, Ryder his left. Asher sat at the far end of the table with Kent across from him, both sporting longer hair than the last time he’d seen them. Civilian life agreed with them and that could only be seen as a good thing. “I hope everyone has had a chance to take a look at the binders I left for you last week.”

Kent flipped it open. “I signed everything and left it at the main office with some guy named Darius Ford.”

“I did the same,” Asher said.

“Good.” Mason nodded. “I wanted to make this transition into our new jobs as easy as possible.”

“We’re looking forward to it.” Kent nodded. “Any idea when assignments will come our way? I don’t like sitting idle.”

“I haven’t been told that yet. For now, we’re to get acquainted with the grounds and take advantage of the high-

level training that's offered. Darius was kind enough to give us a schedule," Mason said.

"I saw that. But is it necessary? We came here for a reason, and we're ready to rock and roll." Kent was the kind of man who wanted to jump right into the action. It was a good trait, but he was a little overly eager.

"It will be required," Mason said.

"But yoga? Why the hell would that be a required skill?" Asher asked.

Cruz and Ryder chuckled, almost as if they agreed, but Mason knew better. It wasn't as if either one of them was going to be racing down the hall to take Nash's yoga classes, but having played hockey for as long as they all did, they had been asked to do some weird-ass training through the years.

Like ballet classes.

That had been hysterical and Ryder and Mason had actually been kicked out of the class for laughing so hard it had become disruptive to everyone else.

"It's not." Mason pulled back his chair and eased into it, setting his stick and puck on the table. "That said, I've taken a few classes myself over the years, and it's good for the mind and soul. However, we're getting sidetracked. Does anyone have any questions before Hank and Jake arrive?" He lifted his stick and pushed the puck across the table toward Ryder.

With a quick flick of his wrist, Ryder hurtled the black circle off the table at Cruz.

"I have one." Asher raised his hand. "Are the three of you really going to continue with that ridiculous game? Do you have any idea how annoying it is?"

"I bought you two a set of sicks," Mason said with an amused tone, remembering the time he'd tried to teach Asher and Kent how to skate. It hadn't been pretty. As a matter of fact, Asher had come off the ice with more bruises on his body than from any mission they'd ever been on. And poor Kent, his ego had taken a big hit. Kent was the kind of man who preferred to be a master at anything he did. If he wasn't, he

didn't do it. The sport just wasn't for them, but kudos to them for giving it a try.

More than once.

But knee hockey was something that had come from Mason's childhood, as well as Ryder's and Cruz's. A game they played as kids in hotel hallways while on their travel and spring leagues. It was dumb as fuck, but Mason continued to find it therapeutic. It calmed his nerves and soothed his soul. It kept the demons from rearing their ugly heads at the most inopportune times.

"Whether we have the damn plastic things or not isn't the point," Kent said. "Watching you flip that rubber puck around drives me batshit crazy. I can't think when you do it. Besides, it's probably not a good look for our first meeting with our new bosses."

Mason snagged the puck midair as Cruz tapped it off the edge of his stick. "You've got a point there." When Mason had taken over as team leader, he answered to his lieutenant colonel, who happened to be Cruz. Before that, he answered to his team leader, who, again, happened to be Cruz, and he never minded.

Cruz was a natural born leader. He had always been the calm in any storm. He didn't falter when it came time to make the tough decisions. He had the respect of the men below him, as well as though he reported to. Not once did Mason ever see the man question himself.

But today, the dynamics were different and Mason needed to respect his men and the chain of command within the Brotherhood Protectors. He also needed to trust himself, a trait that he'd never been able to develop and eight years ago, he lost it altogether. But with Ryder and Cruz at his side, he managed to get the job done.

This shouldn't be any different.

He collected the puck and sticks and set them on the windowsill. "Any other questions?"

"What's on the agenda after this meeting?" Kent asked.

“Darius is going to give us a more in-depth tour. More introductions to other men and women in the organization. And I do expect each and every one of us to sign up for a class. I don’t care which ones, but I want full participation. We can always hone our skills. We could be called at any moment to aid in another mission, so we need to be prepared for that.” A tap at the door caught Mason’s ear. He stood, snapping to attention.

“At ease,” Jake said. “You’re not in the military anymore.”

“Those habits are hard to break, sir.” Mason gripped the sides of his chair and forced his ass back in it.

“Like I said earlier, the name’s Jake, not sir.” Jake stepped into the room holding a folder.

Hank followed. He leaned against the windowsill, taking one of the hockey sticks in his hand. “Oh my. Knee hockey. I’ve seen kids playing this game. I find it fascinating. Didn’t a couple of you play hockey for the Air Force Academy?”

“That would be me and Mason.” Ryder waved his hand. “Cruz played with us back in high school, but it was Mason who had real skill.”

“Still does,” Cruz added. “You should see him fly across the ice. His puck handling skills are impressive.”

“As a goalie, I try to avoid his slap shot at all costs,” Ryder said. “I’m just glad I’ve almost always played on the same team.”

“He’s a shitty teacher though.” Asher shook his head. “Even though I managed to stay up on my skates, he kept knocking me over.”

“I think that’s called checking,” Kent said. “But I don’t understand the game. Baseball, basketball, football... things with balls. I get those. But I’ll never understand grown men slamming each other into plexiglass. Or dropping the gloves and punching each other.”

“Technically, fighting isn’t allowed,” Cruz said.

Jake laughed. “I don’t get the game either.” He handed Mason a folder. “I wish we had more time to give you to settle in, but we’ve got a case that demands the touch this team was created for.”

“We’re ready to dig in,” Kent said, rubbing his hands together. His eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning.

Mason flipped open the file and groaned.

Isabella Carter. New Owner of the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. Former Beauty Queen.

He knew Isabella Carter. Any man with a beating heart who spent any time in Colorado would know the name. Hell, any human in the United States would have recognized Isabella Carter. Her beauty was undeniable, but it was her outspokenness regarding change in the pageantry world that made her a household name. She was not a woman whom Mason would want to spend any time alone with, much less wind up on a protection detail.

“This is a sensitive one,” Hank said. “Our client isn’t necessarily a willing one.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Mason mumbled, pushing the folder toward Ryder, who arched a brow.

“Do you know Isabella?” Jake asked.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but she was the reigning local beauty queen when we were at the Air Force Academy. I believe she had gone on to become Miss United States or something. She was at our homecoming our senior year. She also attended a few hockey games.” Mason would never forget the fanfare that came with Isabella’s visits. It was as if the president had come. It had been impossible to ignore. He and Ryder had to see what the fuss had been all about and they dragged Cruz with them because they could.

“I remember her,” Cruz said. “Didn’t she make some weird speech that had everyone up in arms?”

“She turned her speech into a political statement.” Ryder passed the folder back to Mason.

“It wasn’t political. Just strange.” Mason folded his arms. “It was more about equality for sexes. She made a big deal about perceptions of pageants, but it was the angry tone in which she went about it that got her in trouble, I believe.”

“Well, she’s still making waves regarding equal rights, women’s rights, and the use of pageants to get women there,” Jake said. “Her pageants—and she owns a few—touts themselves as organizations that promote women and help them gain access to opportunities they wouldn’t normally have. She’s always rooting for the underdog. Diversity is important to her in her pageants.”

“It says here that she doesn’t consider her contests beauty pageants but scholarship programs,” Hank said. “She gives away a lot of them. She raises tons of money for every community her pageants land in. She works with numerous foundations that she partners with to help raise money. She’s honestly quite the philanthropist, but she does tend to open her mouth when she shouldn’t and she pisses off a lot of people.”

“I’d like to circle back to two points.” Asher wiggled two fingers. “The first one is why isn’t she a willing participant and what are we protecting her from?”

“Isabella already has a security company in place for the pageant. However, her father and stepmother have hired us after a rock was thrown through their front window. A note was attached to it saying: *We don’t want her back. She’s poison. Tell her to go home or else.* It freaked her stepmother out and they feel more is needed.”

“Is Isabella living with her parents?” Kent asked.

“She is staying with them temporarily until her rental becomes available in Colorado Springs. I believe that is happening this week,” Jake said. “It’s not the first time Isabella has been threatened, but it is the first time it was done so anonymously. Her father wants us there as an added precaution and this is what we hired this team for. However, we don’t want everyone to go.”

“We thought three of you would do the trick. The other two can work from back here and help with the rest of our

caseload.” Hank tapped his fingers on the table. “You can coordinate with Sparrow Bishop. She heads up the local sheriff’s office here in Fool’s Gold and knows the department heads who will be supporting the security company already in place.”

Mason glanced around the room, then shifted his gaze back to the file. There would be an outdoor parade as well as other activities the contestants would be participating in at other locations, both indoors and outdoors.

There was the talent exhibition. A night filled with interviews. Another night where the contestants were dwindled down to ten and then the final where the princess would be crowned. Mason knew jack shit about beauty pageants or people who competed and honestly, he would have preferred to keep it that way.

“We’ll leave you to figure out who you take.” Jake rested his hand on Mason’s shoulder. “It’s your case and your call. Just let us know. You’ll need to be ready to leave in two hours.”

“We appreciate the work and the vote of confidence.” Mason nodded.

“Whatever you need, Darius Ford is your point of contact as well as Sparrow and her husband Stone. He’s also part of the Brotherhood Protectors. He’s one of our best.”

Mason flipped a few more pages, scanning the documents. Isabella’s history was certainly rich and flavorful. He couldn’t deny the good she did for the community and for the most part, the girls within her organization sang her praises. But for every twenty people who adored Isabella, there was someone who despised her with as much passion. Or at least that’s what the information in the folder had provided.

He waited a few moments after Hank and Jake left before glancing up at his team. All eyes were on him, and every single man had that eager expression, waiting to be told if they were the one he would call to action.

This part of the job sucked.

Leaving part of his team behind on their first mission wasn't ideal. It was hard enough that Asher and Kent often felt excluded, which was never the case when it came to a mission, but it was hard to erase a lifetime of history.

Mason needed to do what was best for this assignment and that came down to picking two men based on their previous roles from the Air Force Special Warfare team.

That immediately meant Mason wouldn't be taking Asher. Granted, counterterrorism could come in handy. It was a unique skill set, but the threat didn't indicate that this was political. The file indicated that every threat in the past was personal.

Because of the outdoor activities and how the weather could shift this time of year in Colorado, Cruz was an obvious choice. Not to mention Cruz had an intimate relationship with Colorado Springs. He knew the city. His wife—or as he liked to call her—his soon-to-be ex-wife lived in Aurora, Colorado, outside of Denver. Bringing Cruz was a must in Mason's eyes.

That left a choice between Kent—combat medic. Or Ryder—combat rescue officer. The main difference was that Ryder had the added *prepare, plan, execute, adopt* portion on his resume. He had often provided that expertise to command and battle staff on various missions.

Mason rubbed his temples.

He had to also consider the fact that Ryder and Cruz had a more intimate look into Isabella's past. They had seen her in action, giving them a unique perspective that Asher and Kent didn't possess.

“Who's it going to be, man?” Kent asked with a tight jaw, showing his aggravation with the situation.

“I want all of you to know that I'd prefer to take the entire team. I don't like being put in this position. However, I have to do what I think is right for the mission. It's not personal. It's not based on anything other than what I see on these pages.” He closed the folder and clasped his hands. “Cruz and Ryder, go pack your bags. We'll meet at my place in one hour. Asher

and Kent, stay put for a moment. I'd like to talk with you before I leave."

Without saying a single word, Cruz and Ryder took their sticks and shuffled from the conference room.

The jaded silence filled the space like a thick fog.

Mason pressed his hands on the table and rose. "I know it must feel as though my choice is based on the fact that I've known Ryder and Cruz longer, but rest assured it's not. We've been a team for a few years and I wouldn't have asked you to join me here with the Brotherhood Protectors if I didn't consider you brothers—family."

Asher raised his hand, palm out. "Considering the protection detail, I get it. I really do. We're just ready to work. The adjustment to civilian life hasn't been as easy we thought."

"Agreed." Kent pushed back his chair. "It's not easy to sit on the sidelines."

"I'm not asking you to. There will be things we'll need you to do from here. We have to remember our role. We won't always be the ones in the action. We will often take on mission planning, not execution, and that's what I'm going to need from you," Mason said. "And if or when the time comes that I need more men, I will be sending for you."

"What if Jake wants to send someone else from the Brotherhood Protectors?" Kent asked.

"That won't be an option." Mason lifted the file and tucked it under his armpit. "It was all part of our employment contract. Our missions, our men. We choose."

"All right then, it's settled." The tightness on Kent's face evaporated into thin air. "You tell us what you need. We've got your six, but goddamn it, I ain't doing no yoga. I don't care how cool that Nash guy is; it's not happening."

Mason laughed. "He's also a weapons expert. Go to the gun range and let off some steam. I'll be in touch once I get to Colorado Springs."

“Be safe,” Asher said.

Mason let out a long slow breath as the two men disappeared into the hallway, willing his heart rate to decrease. He'd rather be shot at than make these kinds of decisions. Taking orders was easier than handing them out and he preferred being on the receiving end of them any day of the week. He'd spent his life trying hard not to be the natural born leader his older sister had always told him he was destined to become.

He glanced toward the ceiling. “It’s all your fault,” he whispered.

“Talking to Mary Lou again?”

Mason glanced over his shoulder. He should have known Ryder hadn't left yet.

“Something like that.”

“Asher and Kent took the assignments well enough.”

Mason leaned against the table. “I fucking hated doing that and not just because it appears I played favorites, but I'm making decisions about who I'm potentially putting in the line of fire.”

“That’s what a leader does, and before you go and rattle off all the stupid reasons you have for not believing you don't have the mentality for it, remember we all signed up for the military. We put ourselves in a dangerous job. Not you. And you and Cruz might have been the ones to get the ball rolling with the Brotherhood Protectors, but no one twisted our arms coming here.”

That all might be true, just like he hadn't asked Mary Lou to pick him up, but he had pushed the idea to let him drive. Had he not done that, she'd be the one still breathing.

Not him.

Her children would still have their mother.

Her husband wouldn't be raising them alone.

And his parents wouldn't have this constant sadness etched in their gazes.

"I know what you're thinking and you can't go there," Ryder said. "She wouldn't want you to. Besides, she knew as well as everyone else on this team that you're the best person for this job."

Mary Lou had always been his biggest cheerleader. She went to as many hockey games as she could and she was one of the loudest fans in the stands. She even got herself kicked out of a few games when she felt the refs were too harsh in handing out penalties. He tended to be a hothead on the ice, especially when the opposing team got chippy with his goalie, who happened to be Ryder.

The first time Mason had been named captain of his hockey team, Mary Lou had baked him a cake and thrown a mini party. She'd been so proud of him when all he wanted to do was bury himself in the tallest snowbank. There were so many other players on the team that he thought would have made for a better captain. He didn't care that he might have been one of the best players on the team because he didn't believe that gave him any leadership qualities. But Mary Lou, his parents, and all his coaches had told him it was his humility, his quiet reserve, and the respect the other players had for him that landed him in that position.

"Cruz has the higher rank. He would have—"

"He's good at commanding operations of large platoons. Managing more than one operation. When he was our team leader, who did he go to for advice? Who was in his ear helping him decide?"

Mason ran a hand across his mouth and down his chin. "That's different. He didn't have to listen to me."

"But he did, because you see things in a way the rest of us don't." Ryder raised his hand over his shoulder. "Asher and Kent know you made the right decision. If they thought otherwise, they would have said so and you know it. The one thing we can count on about everyone on this team is we're

not afraid to speak our piece. Trust your gut. I wouldn't be still following you around like a pathetic puppy dog if I didn't."

"Pathetic is one word to describe it." Mason stood tall. "We better roll. Cruz doesn't like to be late, and we won't hear the end of it if we make him wait."

CHAPTER 2



NEVER IN A MILLION years did Isabella Carter think she'd ever move back to Colorado Springs. It wasn't that she didn't like her hometown because she loved it and the state. It was where she'd grown up. Where she'd learned about who she was as a woman. She'd even chosen to go to a local college. But once she graduated and continued with her ultimate goal of becoming Miss United States and working in the pageant industry, she'd outgrown Colorado Springs.

"Hey, little girl." Her father tapped her shoulder. "You always did enjoy a good glass of wine in front of the crackle of a fire. Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not, Daddy." She recrossed her ankles, shifting in the oversized chair. Swirling her wine, she stared at her dad as he poured a glass of red and made himself comfortable in the matching chair. "Where's Leah?"

"She's in the kitchen getting a tray of something for our guests. You know how she gets. She wants to make sure everything is perfect and she's worried we won't have anything they like." He glanced at his watch. "The men from the Brotherhood Protectors should be here within the next thirty minutes."

"You're overreacting to what happened. It's not the first time I've been threatened. Some people just don't like what we do, especially the ones that allow toddlers to compete. I'm sure I don't need to remind you of one very famous case that had this state in an uproar."

“No, you don’t.” Her father took a long sip. In the early years of her pageant days, he’d struggled with her passion for it. She’d been only two years old when her mother had started her in them and it had been a huge bone of contention with her parents.

Her father had believed all the makeup and dressing up was too much. That it was overkill for a child so young. He begged her mother to do things that were less glitz and glam, but Isabella had taken to the spotlight like a fly on shit. Not only did she love the attention, but she loved the way it made her feel.

Empowered.

The confidence it had given her wasn’t fleeting. It was all-encompassing and she carried it into everything she did. Her schoolwork. Cheerleading. Gymnastics. Debate club. It was for those reasons her father had relented, even after her mother had passed away when she’d been seven years old.

Getting her stepmother on board had been no easy feat.

Leah was the complete opposite of her mom. She wasn’t a socialite, at least not in the early days, but over the years, she’d grown into the role her dad’s position in the community had required. However, that didn’t stop her from fretting over not feeling as though she wasn’t good enough or that she would forever be in the great Madeline Carter’s shadow.

“But still, I’ll feel better if your return to the pageant that sent you to becoming one of the reigning queens in the industry had the best security money can buy.” He set his glass on the coaster and leaned closer. “And it will help keep my wife off my back. She’s scared shitless.”

Isabella laughed. Her dad had always been a man’s man. He’d come from humble beginnings. His parents had been poor. He’d never gone to college. He was considered a self-made man. He was well respected in some of the wealthiest circles in Colorado, but he lived his life as though he were one of the regular folk. He drove a basic car and had lived in the same home for the last twenty years, doing as little as possible to it. He didn’t believe in showing off his good fortune and

often wished Isabella wasn't so flashy with her designer handbags and flashy cars.

"I really don't believe we have anything to worry about," she said. "I don't want you spending money on this."

"It's done and I'm not arguing with you about it."

When her father had proposed the idea, she had told him absolutely not. She wouldn't foot the expense. It wasn't that she couldn't afford it. She could. However, a rock through a window didn't match the level of what her father had done by hiring this organization. The fact he'd gone and done it without her permission still burned her ass. "It's over the top, Daddy. And you're wasting your money, something that upsets me."

"Well, it's my money and you're my little girl. I wish you weren't so cavalier about the situation." Her father lifted his glass and stared into the rich liquid, giving it a good swirl. He'd always had a taste for an expensive wine. It had been the one thing he enjoyed spending money on and he had quite a collection. When he would come visit her in California, he would spend an extra couple of days visiting Napa Valley, touring different wineries. He'd ship cases home each time and hope they'd last until his next visit. "I know there were other pageant organizers who bid on the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. One in particular doesn't like you and he has made his disdain of your purchase quite clear."

"Herb Rullo might be bitter over the fact that I outbid him, but even he wouldn't stoop as low as to toss a rock through a window."

"He's started rumors about you. He's tried to discredit you in the past," her father said with an arched brow. "He called you the fakest beauty queen on the planet and that all you know how to do is copy his formula for producing well-rounded contestants."

Isabella laughed as she stretched out her legs. She lifted her hand and stared at her freshly manicured nails, which were fake. Parts of pageants were an illusion. The glitz and glam weren't the story. They were the draw. The hook. What

mattered was what the girls represented and more importantly, who they were and what they stood for. Winners weren't decided on how pretty they were, although that did play a role, a fact she couldn't deny. It's why in her pageant organization, she had created contests for all.

There were pageants for toddlers where all the makeup wasn't part of the program. The pageants were open to both sexes. Ones for people with disabilities. She'd spent the last five years of her career making sure pageants were open to the masses, while still maintaining the integrity of the main event.

That's what had gotten her in trouble with people like Herb. They didn't like anything but the original format. All glitz. All glam. All girls. It had to be about sex appeal and nothing to do with intelligence or what young women could offer to the world, even if Herb said that mattered. The problem with Herb was he didn't actually care what happened to the girls after their reign as princess or queen of whatever pageant had ended. That was on them.

Isabella wanted her girls, win or lose, to have a life. One that mattered. One that changed the world.

"Daddy, I'm not concerned about what Herb or anyone else thinks of me. I only care about doing good and that's what I'm doing." She shifted her gaze and smiled. "My pageant girls have gone on to become doctors, educators, one is even running for office. I empower young women, and men, to be the best that they can be. I help people gain confidence and give them tools to survive in a world filled with uncertainty."

"I no longer question what pageants can do for someone, but I still have my doubts about the message it sometimes sends. I mean no disrespect, dear, but look at you." He waved his hand dismissively. "It took you two hours to prepare yourself to meet with the men from the Brotherhood Protectors. I'm sorry, sweetie, but you dressed like that wasn't necessary."

She glanced at her sparkly four-inch Jimmy Choo heels. They were her new favorite shoes. She'd bought them two days ago and loved them. They were open-toed, which might

not have been the smartest choice for May in Colorado. Temperatures could range as low as thirty with a high of seventy. And snow could always be in the forecast. But they were too cute to pass up.

Her slacks were designer as well. They had a silver strip down each pant leg that matched the sparkles on her shoes. One of the reasons she'd chosen them. Not to mention they fit her like a glove, showing off her figure. One she worked hard to maintain, which wasn't easier now that she'd passed the midthirties mark. Her blouse was low-cut, so she could wear her favorite dangling necklace with the right amount of bling to go with her shoes.

It was the perfect power outfit to make an impression.

"I take pride in how I look, Daddy. There's nothing wrong with that."

"You're beautiful without all that. Including the makeup. I mean, do you really need the lashes? All that eye makeup? You look like you're going on stage." Her father sighed.

The conversation reminded her of her days in high school when she'd bop down the stairs with her perfectly styled hair that she'd woken at five in the morning to prepare and her father would greet her in the kitchen and blink ten times before saying, *you're not going to school looking like that, young lady*. But ultimately, he'd relent and she'd walk out the door with her full makeup, designer clothes, and feeling like a million bucks.

However, in the back of her mind, there was a pang of doubt.

Like now.

Her father had been the one person she'd never been able to fully please. She knew he was proud. That wasn't the problem. But he wanted his little girl to be exactly that, and Isabella never felt comfortable being anything other than Isabella Carter, the beauty queen.

Good, bad, or indifferent, it's who she was, and it was who she planned on remaining. She didn't know how to be

anything else. Part of her wished she could walk out of her house wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with no makeup like everyone else. But if she did that, every news outlet would report something unseemly. They would wonder if she was washed up. Or sick. She couldn't afford to be seen as anything other than the Queen of Pageants.

"I've never tried to change you, Daddy. Please don't do it to me," she said softly.

Her father reached out and took her hand. "Little girl, that's not what I'm trying to do. I'm only suggesting that there's a time and place. And I don't believe this is the place."

Staring into the fire, she took the last sip of her wine, contemplating her father's words. While they weren't meant to be hurtful, they stung nonetheless. They only served to remind her that she was one-sided. "Did I tell you that I have a meeting tomorrow with Kennedy Sinclair?"

"You did not." Her father's face lit up like a the Fourth of July. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"High school," Isabella admitted.

"Is this a social get-together?"

"Yes and no," Isabella said. "I reached out to her in part because I wanted to reconnect. I always liked Kennedy. We were good friends, but lost touch over the years. As we chatted on the phone, we discussed her family's foundation and how we could partner together. She wants to donate to the pageant. So it's also a business meeting."

"The Sinclair Foundation does great things." Her father nodded and smiled. "Please give her our best."

Leah scurried into the living room, smoothing down the front of her dark ankle-length skirt. She wore a yellow sweater and her shoulder-length blond hair had been pulled back into a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. It wasn't the best look for the woman, but Isabella gave her credit for trying. Especially in the makeup department. It wasn't too heavy; however, she was wearing more than usual.

Her father frowned at the display but said nothing.

“A car just pulled into the driveway. I believe our guests have arrived,” Leah said with a nervous tremor in her voice. “I put together a cheese board. A veggie and fruit tray. I also have a—”

“I’m sure it’s all fine, Leah,” her father said as he rose. He stood six foot two and was an impressive man for his age. He worked out daily and it showed. His hair had begun to thin and gray, but he was as handsome as ever. “These men aren’t here to socialize. They are here to work. Let’s have this meeting in the kitchen. There will be plenty of room there for people to sit at the table and look over any paperwork.”

Isabella would have preferred the living room, or even the family room. However, she’d learned to pick her battles with her father and this wasn’t an argument worth having. “Sounds good, Daddy.” She stood and glided across the carpet.

“I don’t know how you walk on those things and manage to make it appear like you’re floating on air,” Leah said. “I’m wearing one-inch boots and I worry I’ll trip.”

“I might as well have been born with stilettos on my feet.” Isabella laughed. “I would trip and fall if I were wearing flats.”

“Even her slippers have heels.” Her father shook her head. “I once tried to take her on a hiking and camping trip. It was a disaster. We came home after one night.”

Ding-dong.

Isabella groaned. She ran a dozen bigger pageants alongside her hundreds of smaller ones. The larger ones, the ones that gained state or national attention, all had some form of security. That was a given. They hired local security companies, but nothing like the Brotherhood Protectors. They were known more for other types of protection details and had been known to work closely with the government and military.

“Daddy, you can get that. I’ll help Leah.”

Leah raced past the front door and into the kitchen.

Whether Isabella liked it or not, she was going to have to deal with the men from the Brotherhood Protectors. But she could put it off for a few more minutes.



MASON STOOD on the front step of a modest home outside the city of Colorado Springs. It was well manicured in a good neighborhood. It wasn't a mansion by any means, but it wasn't small either. Glancing up at the spacious home, he estimated it to be twice the size of his childhood house. The one his parents still lived in in downtown Buffalo.

Growing up, Mason hadn't realized how much his parents had struggled to keep him in hockey. He'd always had whatever he needed. The equipment. The extra hockey lessons. The travel teams and the added expense of hotel rooms and travel costs. When he'd made a junior team in Canada, his parents didn't once make him believe that money was tight.

But it was and they had sacrificed a lot to help make his dreams come true.

Only, no matter how good Mason had been, when he played with the best of the best, he was merely average. His hopes of being in the NHL soon became a passing thought and he shifted gears. He was eighteen and old enough to realize just how much his parents—and his sister—had put into his hockey. That realization made him seek alternative college options. Ones that didn't require help from his folks.

Playing for the Air Force gave him an education, a chance to continue to play the sport he loved, and a career. It also made his parents ridiculously proud.

Mason had found a place where he belonged outside of the rink. He'd carved a life for himself and loved it.

He'd also found a way to help his parents and sister.

He needed very little his first years in the military and sent much of his paycheck home.

The front door rattled. A tall man stood in the opening. He appeared to be pushing sixty. He was fit, broad, and carried himself with pride. He wore jeans and a dark sweater.

Mason's kind of man.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I’m David Carter, Isabella’s father. Welcome to my home. Please come in.” He waved his hand.

“Thank you. I’m Mason Quinn and these are two of my team members, Cruz Lacerda and Ryder Callahan.”

“It’s a pleasure meeting you.” David closed the door. “Isabella and my wife, Leah, are in the kitchen. Please follow me.”

Mason glanced around the spacious two-story foyer, something he would never understand. A total waste of space. An entire room could have been built above it. But who was he to judge. His sister had often called him a minimalist. He generally lived in studio apartments and she’d harass him that he’d never land a good woman living like that. The problem was that Mason had shit luck with the ladies. His career in the military didn’t leave much room for romance. The girls he did date either wanted him to retire or eventually got frustrated with his lifestyle. One even accused him of loving Ryder and Cruz more than he cared for her and unfortunately that wasn’t a false statement.

Cruz’s wife—shit, soon-to-be ex-wife—had tried setting him up a couple of times but gave up, telling him he was either too picky or too much of a loner. Both were true. If Mason were to ever settle down, it would have to be with a woman who loved hockey as much as he did. Enjoyed hiking, camping, fishing, and all things outdoors. If she didn’t like sleeping in a tent on the ground, all bets were off. He didn’t like going out to fancy restaurants or drinking fine wine. A hot dog on a stick over an open campfire with a cold beer was more his style.

Okay, not necessarily anymore. He was too old for the ground. He’d bring an air mattress or stay in a hotel. And a burger joint did the trick.

“Ladies, this is Mason, Cruz, and Ryder.” David stepped to the side, waving his hand. “This is my wife, Leah.” He wrapped his arm around a stunning woman with blond hair.

“And this is my daughter, Isabella, whom I’ve hired you to protect.”

Mason swallowed his beating heart. Isabella was everything he avoided in a woman. She was what he referred to as *plastic*. Everything about her on the outside was overstated. Her hair. Her makeup. Her clothes. And her shoes. Holy fuck, they were weapons, not anything to be worn on feet. The heels were long and pointy. It was impossible not to look her up and down, but when he landed on her eyes, he lost all ability to breathe. Those blue orbs drew him in like the beam from a lighthouse cutting through the fog, leading a ship to safety at night.

“Can I get you gentlemen a glass of wine?” David asked. “I just cracked open a nice cab that I brought back from Napa Valley last month. It’s become one of my favorites. I think you’ll really enjoy it.”

“We don’t drink on the job, sir,” Mason said. Not to mention, he didn’t drink wine. The last time he had, it was at Cruz’s wedding. Or maybe it had been at Christmas a few years ago with his folks. Either way, it wasn’t for him.

David furrowed his brow.

“A small glass won’t hurt,” Cruz said, defusing the insult.

Mason forced himself to tear his gaze from the beauty queen and took a seat at the table. He flattened his hands over the file he’d brought from the Brotherhood Protectors.

Leah placed a few large trays of food on the center of the table and everyone else joined him, except Leah.

“I will let all of you get down to business,” Leah said. She kissed her husband’s cheek. “If you need me, I’ll be in the den.”

“Thank you, dear,” David said.

Mason’s family had always been social. They had parties on a regular basis, mostly impromptu, but they loved to have their family and friends over. Even after Mary Lou had passed, that tradition continued on. It helped his folks with the grieving process and kept his sister’s spirit alive. He wished he

could have spoken to Mary Lou before this encounter. She would have had great words of wisdom, and if she had none, she at least would have made him laugh.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you boys taking on this assignment,” David said as he poured the wine, delicately placing each glass in front of Mason and his men. “When I first spoke to your boss, he wasn’t sure the threat assessment was big enough for his organization.”

“How things go the first few days of the pageant will determine how long we stay,” Mason said. “But it wasn’t the rock that caught my attention.”

“If it wasn’t that, then what?” Isabella tapped her long fingernails on the table. “That’s the only thing that has happened since I arrived.”

The beauty queen spoke and the sound of her sweet voice took Mason by surprise.

It wasn’t quiet or soft. But it wasn’t loud or boisterous either. It had a confident tone. Steady. It was calm but had an air of a bullet hurling through space toward its target. She held his gaze without batting her fake eyelashes.

Mason wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen something so wildly beautiful before. It pissed him off that he found himself attracted to her. She wasn’t his type.

“Herb Rullo of the Tierra Queen Scholarship Organization has been quite outspoken regarding his disdain over you acquiring the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. He believes you will ruin the long-standing traditions the pageant has been known for.” Mason held his hand up when Isabella opened her mouth. “I don’t begin to understand pageants, ma’am. I’ve never been to one, much less watched one. However, I was at the Air Force Academy when you were crowned Miss Pikes Peak. I do remember the drama that ensued between you and the runner-up.”

Isabella lowered her chin. The right corner of her mouth tilted into a smile. “You mean Greta Adams.”

Mason nodded. “She’s also been outspoken recently about your return to the area and isn’t thrilled.”

“Sour grapes on her part.” Isabella shrugged. “Unfortunately, she’s not a good example of pageants. She was coached by Herb.”

“So were you at one time in your career.” Ryder reached across the table and tapped the folder. “But we couldn’t find too much on why you left.”

“That’s easy,” David said. “He’s a bloodsucking asshole who made unreasonable demands of his girls and their families. Not to mention the conflict of interest in his coaching and pageant ownership.”

“We have questions about that, but for now, we want to know why you left Herb’s coaching,” Cruz said.

“My daughter—”

“I’ve got this, Daddy.” Isabella lifted her glass by the stem and sipped. Her pink lips left a stain.

Mason found himself wanting to taste the wine, but not from his glass.

“I was sixteen at the time and pretty well known in pageant circles. Herb had his favorites and I wasn’t one of them,” she said.

“Why not?” Mason found himself lifting his glass and taking a sip. The wine was rich and smooth. A contrast he wasn’t prepared for. It hit his taste buds with an explosion of flavors he’d never experienced. He couldn’t describe them if he tried, but he resented that he liked the damn beverage. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cruz’s smirk. He wanted to kick the man under the table but refrained.

“I wasn’t his idea of the perfect pageant girl because I had ideas.” Isabella’s smile was contagious. Her eyes sparkled and lit up the room. “He groomed girls to be posters. To be two-dimensional, with only one purpose and that was to be pretty. He didn’t care about their future or what would happen to them when the pageants ended, because at some point, they would. Careers needed to be made. Anyone who does pageants

needs to have a goal at the end of the rainbow. The glitz and glam is only one small part. It's the beginning of the journey, not the end. Herb can't see past the crown. While I have made a career out of it, that's not the path for most. I'm unique in that sense. Girls need to think about college. Life outside of pageants."

"But doesn't Herb state he's about scholarships and all the same things you are?" Ryder asked.

"I put my money where my mouth is." She batted her killer eyes. "Whether a girl is doing it for the fun of it or wants to take it all the way to Miss Planet. Winning the crown isn't the end game. Doing something with it is. Herb misses that connection. He might give out a few scholarships along the way and I will admit he's raised a pretty penny for some good charitable organizations, but he still only cares about having one of his girls walking away with the title. That's where the conflict comes in."

"You also coach girls in pageants," Mason said, mentally scolding himself for taking another sip of what could only be described as dessert in his mouth.

"You're only partly right." She lifted her necklace, toying with the diamond pendant that had been dangling in her cleavage. "I own an agency that works with boys and girls. Yes, there is coaching about how to work any pageant. But we work on life skills. Career planning. And I have strict rules regarding my coaches traveling with anyone who employs our services, as in they can't. I do not prepare for any one event. Herb does. He spends exuberant amounts of time and money to prep his contestants to win certain pageants. At the end of the day, I'm not about winning. I'm about the experience pageants offer."

"Don't you believe winning has gotten you where you are today?" Mason asked. "I mean, you attended my senior year homecoming at the Air Force Academy. That speech you gave was all about how becoming Miss Colorado afforded you opportunities you wouldn't have otherwise had."

David took his daughter's hand and for the first time since Mason had walked into his home, the Queen of Pageants' confidence had faltered.

She cleared her throat. "That wasn't my most shining moment, I'll admit."

"Why did you say it, then?" Cruz asked.

"A cocky attitude. Bad advice. And a desire to put Greta and Herb in their place." Isabella released her father's hand. Her glowing demeanor returned. "I had one more pageant I wanted to attend and I'll be honest. I wanted to win if only to prove to them I had what it took. I also knew it would be my last. I had already made provisions to start my own pageant. I had goals. Desires. Other passions in life. I wanted to make a difference and I knew how I was going to do it. However, Herb had always told me that my cavalier attitude toward winning wouldn't garner a Miss United States crown. He didn't believe I had the drive or was even talented enough, much less pretty enough."

"I find that hard to believe," Mason said. "I've only met you and I can tell you're one determined, fiery young woman. And he's totally wrong on all the other points too."

She narrowed her stare. "Thank you, I think."

Mason laughed. "It's a compliment."

"Once Isabella left Herb's coaching, he did everything he could to belittle her," David said.

"Daddy, he did that when I was with him. He called me fat. He told me my forehead was too big. That my eyes were too close together. That my ass looked like an extended cab. Not to mention he believed my talent should be gymnastics or baton twirling, not a dramatic reading of something I personally wrote." She dropped her pendant.

Unfortunately for Mason, he followed the sparkly thing. He blinked, forcing his gaze to her eyes.

Stunning.

This woman was going to be the death of him. Mary Lou was laughing her ass off in heaven. She always told him that he looked for love in all the wrong places. That the kinds of women he dated were more like buddies. Girls he could have fun with, not be in a loving relationship with.

But Isabella wasn't the woman for him.

That was a stupid notion and he pushed the thought from his brain as fast as it had landed.

"No one should tell a girl, or a boy for that matter, any of those things," Isabella said with a harsh tone.

Mason continued to stare. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't believe anyone would say those things about you."

"Oh, he did. And he did it to others." Her nails rhythmically tapped against the table. "I get the disconnect the public has with beauty pageants and the way I look. I do all this." She waved her hand across her face. "For me."

David rolled his eyes. "Little girl, let's not kid ourselves; you also like the attention."

She cocked her head and pursed her lips. "I won't deny that I adored being on that stage. Loved hearing the applause when my name was called. But it never mattered if I won or someone else did."

"I know that, sweetie. But looking good is part of the package when it comes to pageants. Something I'll never understand." David sighed.

"We're getting sidetracked." Mason flipped open the folder. "Between what you gave the Brotherhood Protectors and the research we did on our own, there is one girl competing in the pageant who is coached by Herb and she's a crowd favorite."

"Jessel Babcock," Isabella said. "Three pageants ago, her crown was taken from her because she hid another girl's talent costume right before she was supposed to go on stage. It wasn't proven until after Jessel was crowned. She was fined and banned from that particular grouping of pageants. She's only being allowed to compete in this one because she's the

reigning county princess. Otherwise, I'd tell her no. But that would make me look as if I'm trying to hurt Herb over past grievances."

"Are you aware that Herb made a statement this morning about that very thing?" Ryder asked.

"I am." Isabella sighed. "Another reason I'm letting her compete. My team will be keeping a close eye on all the girls. I will not put up with these kinds of things in my pageants. Again, it's not about the crown, but the experience."

Mason liked Isabella's attitude about competition. He shared it. While winning a hockey game was the ultimate, it wasn't the be-all and end-all. If he played well, stayed out of the penalty box, and protected his goalie, it was a win in his book. Hockey had given him so much in life. It had taught him about being part of a team. About leadership. And ultimately, about being a man.

"From here, we will need to assess the risks of each venue," Mason said. "I will be your shadow. You won't be going anywhere without me."

She jerked her head. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No, ma'am, I'm not," Mason said. "I need your itinerary, starting with the rest of today. My team will begin recon of the buildings. The parade route. They will need to interview your staff, especially Adrian Bennett."

"He's not going to like that one bit and he's not on my staff." Isabella chuckled.

"Why not?" Mason asked. "And I thought he was your assistant."

"He was the previous pageant owner's assistant. He's staying on as a courtesy to me because he and I go way back. He's a good man, but he's unique. A bit of a drama queen and likes to do things his way. He's been running Pikes Peak Princess Pageant for twelve years. Change hasn't come easily to him."

Mason arched a brow. "Is there conflict there we should know about?"

She waved her hand. “Oh no. He adores me. He’s thrilled it’s me who took over, and not Herb. If that had happened, Adrian wouldn’t have stayed on. That’s all.”

Mason wasn’t sold on that idea. When someone was used to doing things their way and had to all of a sudden do it someone else’s way, pushback was bound to happen. He picked up a pen and put an asterisk by Adrian’s name. He deserved a closer look.

“Will you be going anywhere this evening?” Mason asked.

“We’re in until morning,” David said.

“All right.” Mason nodded. “I’ll make myself comfortable in my vehicle in the driveway for rest of the night. I just need tomorrow’s itinerary from Isabella.”

“You’re going to sleep in our driveway? In your car?” Isabella’s big blue eyes grew even wider. Her lips parted and she gasped as if that was the most absurd idea she’d ever heard. “Is that really necessary? I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“It’s called a protection detail for a reason, ma’am,” Mason said. “I wouldn’t be doing my job if I left your side.”

“And I can’t let you stay outside. It’s going to dip down into the thirties tonight,” David said. “We have a spare room on the first floor. You’ll stay there.”

“Daddy,” Isabella exclaimed. “I don’t think he wants to stay here.”

“Well, I’m not leaving. So, thank you for your offer. I appreciate it.” Mason ignored the glares and snickers from his two buddies. The idea of sleeping in his car hadn’t been all that appealing to his aging back anyway. He pushed back his chair. “Cruz, Ryder. I’ll walk you to the car.” He made a beeline for the door, the rest of the *tres amigos* one pace behind.

Once outside, the fits of laughter filled the cool Colorado air.

“I don’t know what you two clowns are chuckling about.” He unlocked his car and pulled out his rucksack.

Cruz leaned against the hood of his vehicle and whistled. “Damn, I haven’t seen you look at a chick like that since that time we were all on leave and went to that little cantina south of the border. What was her name? Shelley or something?”

“Sheila,” Mason corrected. “And I wasn’t looking at Isabella like anything other than a client.”

“Yeah, right,” Ryder said. “I thought your eyes were going to pop right out of your head.”

“I’ll give her drop-dead gorgeous, but she’s not my type.”

Cruz shook his head. “Mason, you don’t know what your type is because all you’ve ever dated were girls you can go hiking with when we’re not available. But I think she’s one woman who’s off-limits.”

“I don’t think we’re allowed to date protection details,” Ryder added. “But that doesn’t mean when this is all over you can’t get her number and I think you should.”

“Shut the fuck up. Not happening.” He tossed his rucksack over his shoulder. “Go back to the hotel. I’ll see you assholes tomorrow.” Not wanting to be razzed a second longer, Mason jogged back toward the main doors where the most fascinating woman he’d ever met was tucked safely inside.

Engaging anymore with her tonight would be one hell of a big mistake.

And yet that’s all he could think about.

CHAPTER 3



ALL ISABELLA WANTED to do was relax in front of the fireplace with a good book, but Mason's intrusion had ruined that. He might be off in the kitchen or the guest room, but knowing he was milling about her father's house rumbled in her brain like a bad romantic comedy, and she was the unsuspecting star.

His bone structure was that of a model. His lean, muscular physique belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine. And his eyes—good Lord—they were more intoxicating than her father's best bottle of wine. She'd seen good-looking men before. Worked with hundreds of them in photo shoots. They were a dime a dozen in her world.

But none of them had the charisma Mason carried in his thumb.

She set her wine to the side and lifted her book, but every time she tried to focus on the words, images of Mason flashed in her brain. He was a distraction she didn't need. But what did it matter? Dating had become a joke. Men were either intimidated by her drive and ambition or found her too high-maintenance and potentially as fake as her lashes. And that was before they got to know her as a human being.

The last real relationship she'd been in had been over a year ago. It had lasted six months. He'd dumped her because he thought she would rather work than be with him.

Not a false statement, if she was being brutally honest with herself.

The sound of heavy footsteps caught her attention. She closed her eyes for a second and sucked in a deep breath. Those feet weren't her father's, and they sure as hell weren't Leah's.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know anyone was in here." Mason's voice rolled across her ears like melting chocolate over a warm marshmallow. "I got turned around in the hallway but heard the fire crackle and thought I'd sit in front of it and go through your file. But I can go back to my room. I don't want to disturb you."

She blinked, glancing over her shoulder. The only difference in Mason's attire was he'd removed his shoes and was now barefoot.

Damn sexy look. She swallowed. He wasn't her type. She preferred a man in a suit, which wasn't Mason. But he wasn't the rough-and-tumble guy either. He might dress that part, but she knew he could carry off a three-piece suit if the situation demanded. "There's a little wine left. Fill your glass and have a seat. No reason to let a good fire go to waste."

"Don't mind if I do." He found a glass, lifted the bottle, and clunkily filled it with the rest of the wine before plopping himself into her father's chair and stretching his legs out over the ottoman. He could use a good pedicure. Manicure too.

It had taken her years to get her father to agree to regular ones. Now he went once a month and he loved every second. But he didn't tell his male friends, something she understood but didn't agree with. The only way to erase the stigmatism was to say it out loud.

"I hope you have found everything in your room to be to your standards," she said.

Mason chuckled. "Besides the fact I was going to sleep in my car, I'm currently living in a two-bedroom with my buddy Ryder on the outskirts of Fool's Gold. It's scantily furnished, and that's an upgrade from my previous residence. So, this place is like a five-star hotel for me. Trust me, it's more than surpassed any standards I have."

“I’m glad you’ll be comfortable.” She meant that statement. While she didn’t feel his—or his team’s—presence was necessary, she didn’t want anyone to wake up feeling less than refreshed.

“I appreciate you giving us all the previous threats you’ve gotten in the past.” He tapped his tablet. “There’s a lot of emails you’ve received over the years. I find it interesting that they were all signed.”

“Mostly contestants or their family members that felt they were overlooked in a pageant, or an employee that I let go. They wanted me to know how upset they were in my decisions. That’s normal. There are one or two random people that we have no idea who they are, but they have strong personal feelings that pageants are bad.” She stared at his powerful profile, soaking in his ridiculously devilish good looks. She could look at him all day. He was candy for the eyes.

He lifted the glass, fingers all over the bowl, and took a big gulp. Someone needed to teach that man how to enjoy a good glass of wine, because that wasn’t how to do it. “I’m usually a beer guy, but this shit is good.”

“At three hundred dollars a bottle, it better be.”

He jerked his head and glared at her with wide eyes. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“Nope. It’s the one thing my daddy spends money on.” She raised her glass. “Well, that and now security. The wine is a moral imperative. You, and I mean no disrespect, are not.”

He chuckled. It was a deep rumbling noise that came from his chest and sent all the wrong messages to her body.

“We have an IT guy who can work magic on finding out where the anonymous threats might have come from. We will do a threat assessment and full background checks on all the players and go from there.”

“I’ve already done background checks on my employees. At this level, the girls have already been vetted, so that’s not really necessary,” she said. “Most of them I have either seen

before at other pageants, or they are already well known in the industry.”

“We have access to information that you wouldn’t or that a basic check wouldn’t uncover.” He shifted, the glow of the fire catching his soulful eyes. They were a deep blue color, but in the dark room with the dim light, they looked more like the color of the Mediterranean Sea.

She wanted to climb onto his lap and go swimming in them. She found herself wanting to listen to the timbre of his voice instead of excusing herself so she could relax in the privacy of her own room. “Sounds like a lot of paperwork to comb through.”

“Unfortunately, it is. But I have two team members doing all that back in Fool’s Gold.”

“Tell me something,” she said. “What is your opinion of pageants?”

“My thoughts on them are immaterial.”

“Maybe so, but I’m always curious as to what people think of them. They are my business and I’ve spent a lifetime doing my best to help change negative perceptions.”

He set the glass on a coaster. At least he had some etiquette. “I honestly don’t know enough about them to form a proper opinion.”

She lowered her chin. “You knew who I was. Knew I won Miss Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. Saw me speak at your homecoming.” She glanced toward the ceiling. “God, I wasn’t even twenty then. I was just a kid with blinders on.”

“You won Miss Pikes Peak while still under Herb’s coaching.”

“Not true. I left right before the pageant. It pissed him off that not only had I left before one of the biggest pageants of my young career, but that I won, and his favorite girl, Greta, didn’t. And she tried to sabotage me at every turn. But karma’s a bitch.” Isabella smiled. “You’re good at avoiding questions.”

“You shifted my focus, so it was easy.” Mason folded his hands over his electronic device. “I don’t understand beauty pageants. I’ve learned a few things about them over the last day, but I still don’t get them. Their appeal, especially the part where parents are dressing up their little toddlers like adults. But I played ice hockey starting at four and I know a lot of people who don’t get the sport, why I played it, or why my parents let me play on a travel team at six.”

“I went to a few Air Force hockey games. It’s a crazy sport to watch live.”

“We all knew when you were there.” Mason’s lips curled into a sexy smile. “It was hard not to miss the fanfare in the stands. It was a bit distracting at times.”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t know any of the players. The times I went, which wasn’t often, was for publicity and fundraising. Were you any good?”

He shrugged. “That depends on how you looked at it. Back on my travel teams, spring leagues, or on my high school prep team, I was the best. The star player. The one everyone thought had a shot at the NHL. But when you put me with every other star, I was just another hockey player. Average at best. I learned real quick that in the Juniors, my chances weren’t that great. And even if I did get drafted, there were no guarantees. I was overlooked many times for the top opportunities to players who were far more talented than me. When the Air Force Academy came knocking at my door, I jumped. It was a chance to play hockey, get a free education, and figure out what to do with my life outside of hockey. But hockey isn’t playing dress-up.”

“That’s what you believe pageants are all about?”

“It’s what it appears to be from the outside looking in, especially when I see pictures of four-year-olds dressed like you right down to the false eyelashes, fancy clothes, and even high heels. I find that one to be a hard nugget to swallow,” he said. “My sister has a daughter. She’s fourteen now and just started wearing makeup on the rarest of occasions. I can’t imagine seeing her like that.”

“Well, until a young woman is an adult, it’s meant for the stage. It’s part of the show, not a daily reality. I mean, I didn’t go to school looking like this when I was her age.” She tapped her fingernails across her thigh. “Okay, maybe I wore a little more makeup than the other girls and enjoyed clothing more, but that fascination started before my mother entered me in my first pageant.”

“No offense, but I find that hard to believe.” He lowered his chin. “While I had natural athleticism and started talking about hockey at a young age, it was my dad who took me to my first game and it was my parents who taught me how to skate at two. It’s a child’s job to be a kid and a parent’s job to be a parent. They are in the driver’s seat.”

“I’m not denying that, but you’re missing my point,” she said with a dose of frustration dripping from her tongue. “Tell me something, did hockey give you a skill set that helped form your career in the military?”

“Absolutely.” He smiled proudly. “Without it, I’m not sure I’d be the man I am today. It gave me confidence. It showed me how real teamwork made things happen. It taught me how to trust my fellow players and later, the men I worked with in battle. The lessons I learned on the ice still serve me today.”

“Pageants are the same for me, and the boys and girls I work with. The two aren’t much different. Only, I do it in four-inch heels, and you did it on thin-as-hell blades.”

He stared at her shoes. “I don’t know how the hell you walk in those things. They’re weapons.”

“And I wonder how you manage to fly across the ice on razor-sharp metal, carrying a stick and flinging a rubber puck at a man’s face.” She cocked her head. “Kind of barbaric in a way.”

“That’s actually a fair point.”

“Not to mention the slamming into the boards and the glove dropping.” She blinked, making a fist and waving it in the air. “What is up with that? Grown men throwing punches

for no reason. How can that teach you anything other than being an asshole with a grudge.”

“Oh, we have our reasons, though not good ones, and there are life lessons from it if one chooses to look at the bigger picture.” He leaned back, dropping his head against the chair. “I remember the first time I dropped my gloves. I was eleven. It cost me a two-game suspension, but it was worth it.”

“Why?”

“The kid called my sister a slut, among other things. I wasn’t going to put up with that shit.”

“Name-calling is childish and not worth getting tossed from a game,” Isabella said. “Was there anything learned from the experience?”

Mason laughed. “Yeah. That my sister was way scarier than any teenage boy or my mother. The game suspension wasn’t a big deal. I took my punishment. It was deserved, but I told my mother I’d do it again if anyone ever said a bad word about my big sister. All my parents did was tell me that there were other ways to deal with that kind of situation, but they appreciated me sticking up for family. However, when I told Mary Lou about it, she gave me her best older sister frown and told me if I ever pulled that shit again over her honor, she’d be the one giving me a black eye, then proceeded to punch me in the gut to prove a point. She knew how to clock someone, that was for sure.”

“Your sister sounds fun.”

He sighed, running his hand across his face. “She was the best. I miss her,” he whispered.

“Oh no. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” Instinctively, she reached out and rested her hand over his hard biceps and squeezed.

“Thank you. It’s okay. You couldn’t have known.” He turned and smiled weakly. “You’re not what I expected. Well, at least not entirely.”

“I’m not exactly sure how to take that.”

“You’re all decked out like a beauty queen, which I did expect, but your attitude about everything doesn’t exactly match.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I guess I expected all beauty and perhaps no brain. I’m sorry. I realize that’s a stereotype, but I wasn’t prepared for such a worldly attitude. One with such meat and grit. One that goes deeper than the glitter on your face and the sparkles on your shoes,” he said. “Is it safe to assume that this isn’t your daily attire?”

“Oh no. This is me. I’m all about the glitz and glam. I live for it. But I understand it’s not for everyone and it doesn’t always have a place in pageants,” she said. “I took to makeup and dress-up like a dolphin in the water. I wanted to compete in pageants where it was a requirement when I was as young as four. I didn’t want to do any other type of pageant. But I hate to see parents push little girls who either aren’t ready for all this when they are younger, or just don’t want to be dolled up. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. There is a place for it. It shouldn’t be an exclusive club. I’ve worked very hard to provide experiences for anyone who wants to participate from all walks of life. Not just the typical pretty girl.”

He lifted his tablet. “I did read that about you, but that has also gotten some backlash.”

“Everyone’s got an opinion,” she said. “But like hockey, there are elite teams and teams for those who want to play for fun. Pageants shouldn’t be any different.” She stood, smoothing down her slacks. “It’s late. I have an early meeting.”

“Remember, you’re not leaving this house without me.” He rose. “And we need to discuss your move.”

“Please don’t try to talk me out of it. I do not want to continue living here with my dad and his wife. I need my own space and the decorators and movers will be done tomorrow at five. All I have to do is pack my suitcase.”

“That’s fine, but I’m coming with you.”

“I have a spare room.” She sighed. “Or you can sleep in your car. Your choice, but you will need to give me and my assistant space. I hadn’t expected the reins of this pageant to be turned over so abruptly. I have a lot of work to do in order to pull this off and Herb would love to see me fail. That’s not an option.”

“I will do my best to stay out of the way.” Mason nodded. “Your stepmother is nervous about her own safety, so I have worked it out with the local police to have a car in the area. If our threat assessment works out to be moderate or high, I will bring my other team members here to guard your parents.”

“Thank you for that. It’s greatly appreciated.” She rested her hand on his strong forearm.

He had a calm quietness about him that she found herself drawn to. His combination ruggedness and model-like looks made it impossible for her to tear her gaze away. Most men she met didn’t give her both the intellectual brain stimulation and tingles in all the right places for her to be bothered.

But Mason was the whole package.

She found herself mentally dressing him in a designer suit and oh, did he wear it well.

“It’s what I’m here for.” He stared into her eyes, commanding her attention. A long hungry moment ticked by.

Her mouth watered and the desire to feel her lips firmly pressed against his rolled across her body. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest, much like the days when she waited on stage to find out if she was the runner-up or the winner. The end result didn’t matter, but it was the anticipation that was exhilarating.

In this case, she figured the kiss would be the prize.

“Good night, Isabella,” Mason said softly.

Without thinking, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. His skin was soft and warm. “Sleep well,” she whispered. She turned on her heel and glided across the carpet with the same grace she would when exiting the stage. She didn’t dare glance

over her shoulder as she rounded the corner toward the staircase.

Perhaps Mason would visit her dreams, because that's all he could be.

A fantasy.

Becoming entangled with a man like him—or any man—at this juncture in her life would be a big fat mistake.

CHAPTER 4



MASON DIDN'T LIKE RUMMAGING through someone else's kitchen, but the rich coffee aroma assaulting his nose demanded attention. He hadn't slept much between going through the new documents Asher and Kent had sent and doing his perimeter check of the property. He was a little surprised David didn't have a security system of any kind other than one of those fancy doorbells that one could chat through.

He filled his travel mug to the top. He raised it to his lips and let the scalding liquid pump his system full of caffeine.

The sound of heels clicking on the tile floor prickled his ears. He turned his head toward the noise. "Good morning." He smiled at the beauty queen all decked out with her long hair styled straight this time. She wore formfitting white jeans with bling on the side seams, a sparkly dark sweater, and of course, heels that had to be at least four inches high. It amazed him she didn't break her pretty little neck coming down the stairs.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asked.

"When my eyes were closed, I did."

"What does that mean?" She filled a coffee mug with the word *Queen* printed in bold cursive letters on it.

"Well, I walked the grounds every hour just to be safe."

"I can barely function as a human being if I don't get at least six hours of sleep. Not to mention the wrinkles it adds to my face or the bags it would add under my eyes."

He leaned in to get a closer look. “I don’t think I see a single crease anywhere and you have amazing eyes, although I’d love to see you without all that makeup on.”

“That’s never going to happen.” She laughed. “I can count on my fingers how many people have had to suffer through that, and I won’t be adding my protection detail to that list.”

“You’ve piqued my curiosity.” He leaned against the counter and sipped. Something about this girl had caught his attention like a fish on a hook. He couldn’t swim away if he tried and oddly, he didn’t want to. His attraction hadn’t been tamed during the night. Every time he woke and walked through the house or outside, he hoped to catch a glimpse of the beauty queen. His disappointment when he hadn’t had become a source of annoyance. Women didn’t normally get under his skin. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to have a lady in his life, but he’d come to the conclusion that maybe his sister had been right. That he’d been treating the women he dated more as a buddy, and not a partner. But shouldn’t the person he was in a relationship with be his best friend? “Who has had the honor?”

“If you must know, my father and stepmother. A close girlfriend and a couple of past boyfriends.”

“Those are some lucky fellas.”

She arched a pretty brow as she lifted her mug to her lips, holding his gaze, her fake lashes long and lush. Her sparkly purple shadow made her bright-blue eyes dazzle in the kitchen lighting. She was everything he avoided, and yet he wanted to find out all that he could about the sweet Isabella Carter. “You got that right.” She smiled. “Only, none of them turned out to be truly worthy.”

“I have to admit, I like your self-confidence. It’s refreshing.”

“Most people think it’s arrogant and bitchy.”

“I can understand why many would be intimidated by that.” He glanced at his watch. “If you’re going to be on time

for your first appointment, we should probably get a move on.”

“I want to take my own car.”

“That’s fine. I will follow you. But I need you to make sure I’m right behind you at all times.”

“Are you asking me to stop at yellow lights? Because that could be a moral dilemma for me.”

He chuckled. “While the local cops know I’m here, I’m not sure they’d let me off for running a red light because my protection detail has a lead foot and was potentially trying to lose me.”

“I would never try to do that.” She winked. “You’re too cute and I’m dying to put you in a tux at the show.”

He pounded his chest and coughed. “That’s never going to happen.”

“Aw, come on. Wouldn’t being at my side at every turn be the best way to protect me?”

“I can do that without wearing a monkey suit.”

“But having you be my personal escort at all the events would do that better. I’d be draped on your arm. You’d walk me across the stage for each announcement and be with me at the parade. It’s a perfect solution.” She waved her hand. “But your attire needs to be upgraded.”

He opened his jacket. “What’s wrong with this? It’s a sport coat. I literally just bought it and the saleslady told me it was a good choice.”

“What the hell did you tell her you needed it for?” She set her mug on the counter and inched closer. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she ran them across the top as if she were brushing lint or hair off his jacket. Then she tugged at the fabric. “It’s not the worst. The quality is decent.”

“I would hope so; I paid a pretty penny for it.”

“Is it the only one you have?” she asked.

“Why do you ask?” He glared. There had only been two people to ever question his clothing choices. His sister and one ex-girlfriend. Mary Lou thought his standard jeans and T-shirt was boring. He didn’t own anything other than sweats, jeans, sweatshirts, short-sleeved shirts, and a couple of flannels. The fact that he never changed it up, except for the occasional required coat when his parents forced him to dress up, drove her bonkers.

The one ex-girlfriend—which calling her that was a stretch—loathed his clothing. She thought he looked like a bum and that made him laugh out loud. His smirk every time she brought it up ended the relationship. Well, that along with the fact she hated hockey.

How could anyone despise that sport? It was sacrilegious.

“For starters, there will be more than one event you’ll need to dress nicely for, so I’d prefer if you didn’t wear the same coat, shirt, and shoes.” She waved her finger up and down. “Not to mention the dark jeans. While they are a good look and fit on you, they won’t cut it for anything other than maybe the parade.”

“I’m not here to look good.” He folded his arms. “My job is to protect you and everyone at your pageant. If anything, I need to blend in.”

“Exactly my point. In that outfit, you’ll stand out like a pink flamingo.”

He covered his mouth and chuckled. “That’s an interesting analogy.”

She lifted her mug, then took a few big gulps before dumping the rest of it down the sink. “I’ve got a busy schedule today. First meeting is with my old friend at the Sinclair Foundation and then off to the convention center.”

He curled his fingers around her biceps. “Remember, don’t lose me. I don’t want to have to chase you down through the streets of Colorado Springs. That will put me in a sour mood, and you don’t want to see that side of me.”

“First lesson in my demeanor.” Her thick lashes moved in slow motion over her bright-blue eyes. “Don’t tempt me or dare me to do things. I’m always game.”

He cocked a brow. “So, if I dared you to strip and run around the house naked, you’d do it?”

“Aren’t you a naughty boy.” Her lips turned into a wicked smile. “Put enough tequila in me and my clothes might fall off. Now let’s hit the road.”

Damn, that girl was a walking danger zone.

He snagged his travel mug and followed Isabella through the house and out the front door, where he watched her gracefully manage the steps. He audibly sighed at how well she did that, considering she was walking on stilts. He pulled his sport coat tight. The biting cold chilled his bones. He glanced toward the sky. A few dark clouds covered the sun. He’d have to check with Cruz regarding the weather. Cruz had mentioned a potential late spring snowstorm right smack-dab in the middle of the parade. That would make things interesting. “That’s your car? I thought maybe it was your dad’s.”

“You don’t approve?” She tossed her purse into the passenger side of the silver Range Rover Sport equipped with a V8, the fancy tires, and two-toned red-black interior.

“Oh, I approve. I love those vehicles. Now that I’m out here in Colorado, I’ve been considering trading in this bad boy.” He tapped the hood of his old Bronco. It was ten years old, but in mint condition. The only reason he thought about getting rid of the beast was because he’d always wanted a Rover and ever since he’d moved to Fool’s Gold, he kept seeing Land Rovers at every turn.

“I had one of those in college. Good cars. But ever since I was a little girl, I thought if I had one of these.” She ran her long fingernails across the side. “It would mean I made it. I know that’s stupid. It’s just a thing, but it represented financial freedom from my dad. Doing it all on my own.”

“I get that. I bought my first car when I was seventeen. It was a piece of shit, but it was mine.” He strolled around her SUV, doing a quick inspection. “This is my first one of these and I had always wanted one. I thought they were cool and badass-looking. Although, I also always wanted a Rover. I almost bought the exact model you’re driving, but I couldn’t justify the expense. Not while I was still in the military.” He stepped to the driver’s side and frowned. Kneeling down, he examined the tire more closely. “I’ve got some bad news.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve got a flat, and not just any flat. It’s been slashed.”

“You mean like on purpose?” She tapped her shiny boot. At least the heels were a little thicker than the shoes she had on last night.

He couldn’t help but wonder if she would get blown over by a strong wind.

He poked his finger into the four-inch slash. “Yup. Done with a sharp blade. I’m sorry, I should have been more diligent and checked the tires when I did my rounds. I only looked to make sure the vehicle wasn’t broken into or anything.” He stood, planting his hands on his hips. “Your folks really need to get a security system in this place.” He pointed to the door. “They should have four cameras on the front of the house. Two at minimum and the same in the back. I’m thinking I might bring out the rest of my team to have eyes on your parents. They could install it for them.”

“My father hates all that stuff. He thinks big brother or something will end up spying on him.”

“I can assure him that won’t be the case and he can set it all up so he can see everything. He’ll be in total control.”

“I’ll talk to him,” she said.

“All right. Now can you pop the trunk so I can get your spare? It shouldn’t take me too long to change your tire.”

Isabella continued to tap her foot on the pavement. She glanced at her watch. “I can’t be late for this appointment.

Besides the fact it would be rude, it would put me behind schedule for the rest of the day. I hate that.”

“We can take one car. That actually would make me feel better, especially considering someone just slashed your tire. I’ll have one of my men come over, check things out. He can change the tire and bring your car wherever you need.”

“Would he be willing to take it to the tire place?” She lifted her gaze. “That is if I can get a new tire? I hate driving on those spares.”

“Sure. Not a problem. But it might take all day. Since we’re leaving the car here, I want my guys to be diligent in their investigation. This wasn’t an accident. This is now officially threat number two and it’s not settling right in my gut.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Do your parents have a spare key? Or do we need to go back inside?”

“They have one.” She nodded. “I have to admit that this certainly feels more personal than a rock through a window with a generic threat attached to it.” She glanced over her right shoulder, then left. “I figured that could have been anyone. Parents of a child who didn’t win. Or someone in Herb’s camp, but I would have put money on the former.”

“I’ll never forget one travel hockey game where a mom had to be handcuffed in the stands and hauled out. I thought my mom had a potty mouth, but this woman dropped the *see you next Tuesday* word a dozen times. She mixed in some colorful phrases that my little twelve-year-old ears took years to recover from.”

Isabella laughed. “I’m sure you survived the language, but some parents can be the worst. I once had a dad come charging at me, accusing me of rigging a pageant full of six to ten-year-olds. He was pissed that his daughter didn’t win or get any of the special awards. He believed I only wanted underdogs and ugly children and discriminated against the pretty people.”

“Is there such a thing as an ugly child? I mean perhaps some are more awkward than others. I went through that stage when I was a young teenager.” He offered his hand and when she placed her warm palm in it, the heat from her skin ignited

a fire in his veins. The reaction caught him off guard. He glanced between her fingers and her big orbs, losing himself in their beauty. He'd met beautiful women before. He'd been captivated by a few of them, but it never lasted long. Besides literally having nothing in common with a lady who would rather spend her days shopping and getting a mani-pedi instead of hiking or kayaking. He found most incapable of holding his intellectual attention. He wanted a woman who was interested in books. In the local landscape both politically and socially. He didn't care if they held slightly different world views, as long as they weren't so far apart there wasn't common ground.

He guided her toward the passenger side of his vehicle and opened the door.

"I find that hard to believe." She eased into the seat.

He closed the door and jogged around the hood of the vehicle, pausing at the driver's side. He pulled out his cell and shot off a text to Cruz and Ryder. Then to her father. Mason didn't want David to be left in the dark about the situation. For now, Mason would hold off on calling in Kent and Asher. At least until he had more time to discuss it with Cruz, Ryder, and his boss, Jake. He also wanted to know what Darius and his team thought. He needed more information and a little more time to assess the conflict.

So far, Mason couldn't make heads nor tails out of any creditable known threats. He'd tried rating them based on language and number of communications, but in all the years Isabella had been receiving them, nothing had ever come of anything. It had all been benign. Parents blowing off steam, though the way they went about it could still be seen as criminal, he did understand their passion.

The only change had been her move back to Colorado Springs and her purchase of the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. Darius had sent over numerous articles about it this morning. Some good, some not so glowing. There were a few staples in the pageant community who believed that the self-proclaimed Queen of Pageants would change the long-standing traditions of Pikes Peak. Isabella had made it clear she believed that there were some key points of the pageant that were antiquated

and needed to be modernized for the sake of the future of women and equality.

But one thing had jumped out last night and it annoyed him that Isabella hadn't thought it important to inform him of the conflict.

"Trust me, I went through two years of looking like a scrawny, pimply kid. It didn't help that I was on the ice six days a week sweating my balls—I'm sorry. That was rude."

"I've heard it all." She turned and winked. "And I've said it all. Just not in public. So don't change your verbiage for me. However, I do ask that you be on your best behavior around all the pageant contestants, the media, and their families. I do have a reputation to uphold."

"Yes, ma'am." He turned the old-fashioned key. This had been the last year they made this vehicle with that option. He would miss it when he did purchase a new SUV, but he would enjoy all the bells and whistles of a new car. "I need to ask you something about one of the current contestants and their family."

"I'm listening." She crossed her ankles.

He noticed that she never once crossed her legs at the knees. Always the ankles. For some strange reason, he found that utterly fascinating and he wanted to know why.

But that was a question for another day.

"I read that Jessica Babcock's mom is a former beauty queen."

"She sure is. She competed under the name Jenna Louise. She's originally from Denver but relocated with her husband to Colorado Springs about fifteen years ago." Isabella held her hand up. "I should never assume anything, but I suppose you want to know if I was ever friendly with Jenna."

"I need to know every person who might have a bone to pick with you. Currently, there are two potential suspects on my list. Herb Rullo and Greta Adams. I need to know if I'm expanding that list." He flipped his blinker and pulled out onto the street in their quiet little neighborhood. He grew up in

South Buffalo where there were sidewalks and streetlights. The houses in his hood were half the size and while where his folks lived was considered a nice and safe place, it wasn't suburbia. Not like this anyway.

“Jenna and I weren't friends as kids, but we weren't necessarily enemies. We co-existed on the stage. Our drama was kept out of pageants.”

“Is that really possible?”

“Well, let me ask you this.” She shifted in her seat, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “I've seen a few hockey games in my day and it can be pretty violent. All that slamming into the boards. Name-calling. Gloves dropping. Fists flying. Grown men landing themselves in the penalty box and running their mouths off. And yet, I watched those same men who were sworn enemies on the ice, come out of the locker room laughing and having no problems with each other. So, were you able to leave the conflict on the ice?”

“Most of the time, yes. But you're describing the opposite, and you haven't explained the problem, so I can't make a judgment call on if this Jenna person is an issue or not.” He made the right turn out of the neighborhood and headed toward the highway. It would be a twelve-minute drive to the Sinclair Foundation. He'd learned last night that Kennedy Sinclair had also competed in pageants, but her career had been short-lived.

“For the most part, Jenna and I were indifferent to each other. She's a few years older than I am, so our paths didn't cross that much except for in pageants like this one. We weren't close. We didn't travel in the same circle of friends. However, her husband Chuck and I were close. I've known him most of my life. His dad is good friends with mine. Chuck started dating Jenna in high school. They broke up when I was a senior. During that time, he and I started dating. That pissed Jenna off and caused some friction. But Chuck was so hung up on her and he dumped me after two months and begged her to take him back. They've been together ever since.”

“Did you always like him? Is there more to that story? Is she still holding a grudge?”

Isabella laughed. “No to all of the above. Jenna and Chuck are rock-solid and I honestly wasn’t heartbroken over any of it. I went out with him more to appease my dad than anything. He and Chuck’s dad always thought it would be cute if we got together, even though Chuck is like six years older. I think Chuck took me out to make Jenna jealous. We all get a good giggle out of it now.”

“So, you and Jenna are good? Friends?”

“Friends is a strong word for Jenna and me,” Isabella said. “We have nothing in common and I haven’t really seen her in years.” She waved her hand over her face and down the length of her body. “I’m all this. All about the glamour. About being a girly girl. I’m into fashion. Broadway plays. Art. Culture. Jenna, even though she has her daughter in pageants, would rather go fishing.” Isabella shivered. “That’s an activity I don’t understand.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“God, no. Why would I? Fish stink something awful. And the bait? Gross. Not to mention the bugs. Or the potential camping aspect. Where would I plug in my hairdryer? Curling iron or straightener? How would I take a decent shower? It’s barbaric.”

“You haven’t lived if haven’t experienced camping at least once. Plus, if you haven’t gone, how do you know you won’t like it?”

She jerked her head. “You were adamant this morning about not wearing a tux. Have you ever been in one?”

“Yes.” He hit the gas, merging into traffic. “My buddy Cruz’s wedding. It was the most uncomfortable thing I’ve ever had to put on my body. And the shoes, holy shit. They sucked. I thought my feet were going to bleed worse than when I was in the Vietnam jungle for a week in the rain. I had so many blisters I thought my skin was going to rip off right to the bone.”

“Jesus, you’re a dramatic one.” She recrossed her ankles.

One of these days he was going to have to ask her about that, because it had become a burning question in his brain.

“I assume it was a rented tux, correct?”

“It was,” he said.

“Yeah. They never fit right. And their shoes aren’t quality, so I’m not surprised. You need a proper fit. Tell you what. I’ll make a deal with you because if you’re going to stay for the entire pageant, and want to be wherever I go, I will require you—or whoever on your team wants to have access to me—to be in the proper attire.”

“I’m terrified to hear your proposal.”

“It’s simple. You let me get you a proper tux and suit and I’ll let you take me fishing.”

He shifted his gaze. “And when in the hell are you going to have time to do that? I’ve seen your schedule and you’re booked right through to the morning after the winner is announced.”

She tapped her long fingernail to her temple. “You know how tomorrow I have blocked off at three through the rest of the day for spa treatments.”

“I do.”

“Well, I’m not going to a spa. That was my time to catch up on whatever I need. Or to fill in with shit that comes up. So, unless there are problems, we could go for a couple of hours. I know where there’s a few spots. My dad likes to fish.”

Mason tugged at his sport coat. The idea of wearing a monkey suit and parading around on stage with Isabella had two conflicting reactions. The first made him twitch. When he’d played hockey, for the most part it was easy to block out the people in the stands. But he never felt like he was the center of attention. If he was forced to lift his arm while Isabella placed her hand on his elbow so he could escort her across the stage—or whatever she expected him to do—that made him feel as though he’d be on display.

Not something he enjoyed.

And yet, the idea made his insides burn with passion and desire like he'd never experienced before.

Neither one of those things should be a factor in his decision. What mattered was access to the pageant and protecting Isabella and everyone else there from a threat. Cruz and Ryder could blend in backstage. Work with cameramen, stage crew. Gain access to every other place. But someone needed to be with Isabella at all times and the person who was picked for that job had been Mason. He was team leader.

Fuck. "I'll wear the monkey suit, but you're going fishing." He poked her thigh. "I won't let you get out of it."

"If I'm anything at all, I'm a woman of my word." She rubbed her palms together. "Oh, we are going shopping this afternoon and it's going to be so much fun. You have quite the model's body. You're going to look fantastic."

"I know you think that's a compliment, but I'm not taking it that way," he mumbled. He'd rather be called a Neanderthal.

CHAPTER 5



“HOLY SHIT.” Isabella dropped her purse in the chair in front of Kennedy’s big modern desk. “You look amazing. I love the power suit. And your hair. I love that style on you.”

With the grace of a beauty queen, Kennedy rose, smoothed down her dark slacks, smiled, and stretched out her arms. “You haven’t changed one bit. Still the most gorgeous woman in any room.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” Isabella hugged her old friend. One of the few real friends she had growing up. One of the few people in her life who understood her passion and her drive.

Kennedy never once belittled her hopes and dreams. She always supported Isabella. She stood at her side and defended her when others believed she had no depth and thought she was simply another pretty face with no single brain cell. It had been Kennedy who held her hand when she decided to leave Herb’s coaching. Kennedy had been the only one outside her father and stepmother who had truly believed in her vision.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” Kennedy held her by the forearms, looking her up and down. “I’ve missed you.”

“We’ve both been so busy. You with your family’s foundation, doing wonderful things. I’m so proud of you. All the accomplishments. The things you’ve done are truly amazing.”

“You’re too kind.” Kennedy smiled that sweet genuine grin she had when she didn’t want the focus turned toward

what she'd done. She'd always had great humility. It's why she kept much of what she did out of the public eye. "And one to talk. Your pageants have raised a ridiculous amount of money for so many wonderful causes. Not to mention what you've done for many girls who participated. I read recently that one of your girls is now some bigwig in the Peace Corps and she's always telling anyone who will listen that she wouldn't have been able to achieve her dreams without you or the experiences of being in your pageants."

"I don't think it was me personally, but yeah. We're quite proud of her."

Mason cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt."

"Oh. Kennedy, this is Mason Quinn." She turned. "He was hoping you might have a corner he could sit in and do some work while I'm here. But he needs to be close enough to see this office and perhaps the elevator."

"No offense, but that's strange," Kennedy said. "It brings up a plethora of bizarre questions I'm dying to ask."

"My daddy hired him to protect me," Isabella said.

Mason glared, cocking his head.

"Relax. Kennedy's cool. She's not going to say anything to anyone." Isabella shifted her gaze, taking Kennedy's hand. "No one can know I have hired protection."

"I'm not going to say anything. I understand the need to keep some things under the radar. I do it all the time." Kennedy held her hands up. "But how are you going to explain him at the pageant? Although, he's got the physique and the bone structure to be a model. I suppose he could be an escort for the contestants." Kennedy had an eye for good-looking men. Hell, she had an eye for just about anything. She was smart, talented, and beautiful.

There were times when Isabella had been worried that Kennedy could be the one to knock Isabella off her pedestal. Only Kennedy's heart wasn't in pageants. They weren't her thing. Didn't matter that she was a natural. She didn't have the passion to make it her home.

“He doesn’t think that’s a compliment.” Isabella took her friend’s hand and made her way to the sofa in her office. She eased into the plush piece of furniture, crossing her ankles.

“I appreciate the kind words, but I’m no model, nor do I want to be,” Mason said. “Besides, my focus needs to be on Isabella. Speaking of which. I do have some work I need to do while you two ladies are chatting. Is it okay if I sit in the hallway?”

“Sure thing. You can take one of my chairs. If anyone says anything to you, just tell them I said it was okay. If they still have a problem, poke your head in,” Kennedy said. “Do you need our company Wi-Fi?”

“No offense, but I need to make sure everything I do is on a secure line. I’ve got my own.” Mason snatched one of the chairs, dragged it to the hallway, and closed the door.

“Damn girl, that man is fucking hot.” Kennedy crossed her legs.

“He took my breath away. I almost choked on a piece of cheese when he walked into the room.” Isabella tapped her knee.

Kennedy lowered her chin. “I’m not a pageant girl. I can put my ankle on my thigh if I damn well want to.”

Isabella nodded. “Sometimes I can’t help myself. Yesterday, I insulted Leah with something similar. She must have said something to my father because he burst into my bedroom, giving me that stern look he used to do when I was little and trying to break them up.”

“Oh boy. I remember that. You were so worried she was going to take your daddy away.” Kennedy squeezed Isabella’s thigh. “But she only wanted to be part of both your lives.”

“I know that, and she’s good for Daddy.”

“And you.” Kennedy arched a brow. “She’s always been there for you. I know she’s not your mom and never will be, but Leah’s a good person.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Good. Because I want to hear more about this Mason guy, especially what you’re going to tell people about him.”

Isabella hadn’t worked that one out yet. No one seemed to be worried about that. Mason certainly didn’t seem to care. It wasn’t even on his radar. “For now, he’s part of my team. My personal escort. He’ll go wherever I go. Maybe my personal assistant.”

“You already have one of those.”

“And Leslie doesn’t like taking a back seat to anyone. She’s very good at her job. I wouldn’t have even agreed to take on this pageant had Leslie not been able to come here weeks ahead of me to help with the transition. She’s been amazing. Driving Adrian nuts though.”

“Oh, good grief. How is Adrian? Have you seen him?”

“Not yet, but I’ve had a dozen conference calls. He’s been a godsend. Although, I have to admit, I’m a little shocked he didn’t want to stay on.” Isabella leaned back on the sofa, stretching out her legs. It wasn’t often she allowed herself to relax outside of the comforts of her own space. It was her job to always be on. To look perfect at all times. That alone was a full-time job. She wasn’t getting any younger. Hiding the aging process wasn’t easy and she refused to be one of those women who took to the knife. She wasn’t opposed to plastic surgery, fillers, or Botox. But she didn’t want to rely on them. She figured if she ate right, drank enough water, exercised, and took care of herself, she’d be able to fight off Mother Nature a little while longer.

So far, so good.

But she also wanted to help teach women that aging could be beautiful in its own right. It wasn’t always what someone looked like on the outside, but who they were as a person that made all the difference.

“I did hear that he was retiring from Pikes Peak Princess Pageant to focus on his own growing local pageants. The ones that feed into Pikes Peak.”

Isabella nodded. “That and he’s still coaching. But I had offered him a job and he turned me down flat. He said that while he adored me and everything I stood for, he thought it would be a conflict of interest and I suppose he’s got a point.”

“He can also be a bit of a drama queen.” Kennedy laughed. “He freaks out over the tiniest detail. I don’t remember the girl he was coaching when I competed in the Denver Little Miss pageant, but when she forgot the shoes he wanted her to wear over the ones she preferred, he had a shit fit. He waved his arm frantically while pacing up and down the hall, calling every designer shoe store in town. That poor girl ended up in tears when he waltzed into the dressing room with the right shoes in the wrong size and stuffed her poor chubby little feet into those designer heels. She nearly tripped on stage.”

“He is a bit of a control freak.”

“So much so that if you don’t give Mr. Tall-Drink-of-Something out there a title, he’s going to toss him out on his ass,” Kennedy said.

“For someone who left pageants as a teenager, you’re still quite insightful.”

Kennedy blew on her painfully un-manicured nails and rubbed them on her shoulder. “It comes from years of following you around. So, what are you going to tell Adrian about Mason? And it better be a legit job. One that he can at least fake being good at.”

“He’s got no style. I doubt he could walk the stage without looking like he’s got a stick up his ass. And his knowledge of pageants is pitiful.”

“What talents does he possess, besides dressing up my hallway?” Kennedy winked.

“He played hockey for the Air Force Academy. I was at his homecoming and he heard that horrible speech of mine.”

Kennedy covered her mouth, dropped her head back, and burst out laughing. “How embarrassing.”

“Tell me about it.” Isabella tapped her nail against her temple. If it were up to her, she’d stick Mason somewhere in

the back, but she knew he wouldn't hear of it. Her father would have a fit. Besides, she wouldn't waste her dad's hard-earned cash that way. She'd already tried to give her old man the money, but he was too proud to take it. "I could tell Adrian he's my boyfriend."

"You think Adrian's going to allow your boy toy to have full-on access to what he's always believed to be his pageant?"

"It's not his. Never was. And now it's mine." Isabella sat up straighter. "Besides, a few years ago I was dating this guy who I had as my escort on stage. Granted, he was a model and knew what he was doing, but still. It could work. It would give Mason a reason for constantly being there, in my ear, doing whatever it is he needs to without question."

"It could also blow up in your face, causing a lot of press that I'm sure he doesn't want." Kennedy brought up a valid point. "And what about Leslie? Won't she know you're lying?"

"She's my assistant. Not my friend. I keep that very separate. She and I don't socialize and I don't tell her anything about my personal life. She's excellent at what she does, but I don't want her or anyone else who works for me up in my business." Isabella had dated her last boyfriend for two months before anyone had found out. It was important to her that her private life remain exactly that—private. Only, lately, she didn't have much of one. It had been two years since she'd had a real relationship and the few dates she'd gone on had been miserable. "Honestly, if it were up to me, I wouldn't have hired anyone. But I will let my dad do his thing. I'll have a chat with Mason and see what his thoughts are. This is his area of expertise anyway."

"Good idea." Kennedy stood and strolled to her desk, snagging a folder. "I want to jump right into what we talked about on the phone because I have another meeting in a half hour."

"I really do appreciate the donation."

"I want to do more than donate." Kennedy handed her a stack of papers. "While pageants weren't for me long term,

they did give me confidence. They helped me get out of my shell and I learned so much about myself thanks to competing in them. I also got to meet you.” She took Isabella’s hand. “A friendship that I have always cherished, even if we haven’t spoken in many years.”

“I’ve always adored you.”

Kennedy smiled. “I took the liberty of drawing up contracts in hopes that you’d find more of a sponsorship—partnership—agreeable.”

Isabella flipped through a couple of pages before shifting her gaze. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“I’d like to offer internships to your girls every year. Not necessarily the winner and not just those competing in this pageant, but your organization as a whole. I believe together, we could do a lot of good. As you know, the Sinclair Foundation loves to give back to the community. We’d like to help the girls and boys in your pageants achieve their goals and make a difference in the world.”

“That sounds amazing. Why didn’t we think of this before?”

Kennedy shrugged. “We’re offering a generous amount of money. We’ll do a full college scholarship program. Internships for those who qualify. In return, we’d like some advertising in your programs. Support when disasters happen. Those kinds of things.”

“Sounds like a win-win.”

“Take the contracts and have your lawyer look them over. The sooner we can get this ball rolling, the better. But take your time. I don’t want you to feel rushed. But I really believe this could be great for all involved.”

“I do too.” Isabella stood, tucking the folder into her purse. “Do you have a digital copy?”

“Of course.”

Isabella pulled out her business card. “Send them to me and I’ll make sure my attorney gets them within the hour. If all

is good with him, I'll sign them and have them back to you before the end of the day."

"And here I thought I was going to have to push you off those stilettos." Kennedy jumped to her feet, pulling Isabella in for a bear hug. "I know you're going to be insanely busy with this pageant for the next week. But let's get together for a good old-fashioned girls' slumber party when it's over like we used to when we were kids."

"I'd love that." Isabella kissed Kennedy's cheek. "I better go collect Mason and head down to the convention center."

"You mean your new boyfriend."

"Aren't you the funny one." Isabella gripped the door handle with shaky fingers.

Mason had her stomach filled with butterflies. A sensation she hadn't felt since she'd given her dumbass speech at the Air Force Academy. Not much rattled Isabella. It wasn't that she didn't get nervous. She did every time she took the stage. But she'd learned over the years to let her confidence be her guide. It wasn't that she thought she was better or prettier or even smarter than anyone else.

She wasn't.

Remove all the glitz and glam and she was just another girl walking down the street. She'd made herself into the Queen of Pageants. A title she wore with pride. But what people didn't understand was that it had never been about being beautiful. It had always been about being memorable. About being someone who could stand out and make a difference. When she walked into a room, people knew who she was. Unfortunately, many mistook what she stood for.

She chose not to correct the masses. She let her work—and her girls—speak to all the accomplishments.

That had been more important than a few idiots who perceived her as being shallow.



IF THERE WAS EVER a time Mason wished he had his hockey stick and the *tres amigos* with him, this was it. Talk about being out of his fucking element. It was worse than when he'd been his sister's male of honor—or whatever she'd called it—at her wedding.

He understood the sentiment behind the grand gesture, but he felt like a freaking idiot, especially since she demanded he wear his Air Force dress uniform. He hated that fucking thing. As bad as a monkey suit. He'd never forgive Cruz for that one. The only thing worse than the tux was that Cruz had left his wife. A mistake and everyone but Cruz seemed to know that.

Mason followed Isabella and her damn high-heeled boots that reached her knees. He wanted to believe they were stupid, only they were about the sexiest things he'd ever seen.

Isabella was so gorgeous he couldn't stop staring at her half the time. He was like a lovesick puppy.

So far, he'd met a half dozen people, but no one on his growing suspect list.

Herb Rullo.

Gretta Adams.

Jenna and Chuck Babcock.

He also wanted to meet her assistant, Leslie Philip, and some dude named Adrian Bennett.

He had a file on Leslie, and so far, she came up smelling like a rose. That gave him pause. No one was that squeaky clean. Not even his sister when she'd been alive.

Adrian had a few strikes against him.

He'd been deemed difficult to work with by the woman who used to run the pageant. A few complaints by parents and contestants. Some articles did not paint a man with a stellar reputation. Words often used to describe Adrian included *drama queen*, *diva*, *harsh*, and *overbearing*, to name a few.

However, that didn't make him suspect, especially since he'd never once said a negative thing about Isabella, where

everyone else had at one point, including Jenna and Chuck. Not to mention the love triangle.

“There you are,” a female voice rang out from a few feet behind Mason. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Sorry, Leslie,” Isabella said. “I can’t go two feet without someone wanting something.”

“A box came for you from a private carrier. I don’t know what it is or who sent it,” Leslie said. “Did you order something that I’m not aware of?”

“You have the list. Nothing should have changed,” Isabella said.

“Where is this package? When did it arrive?” Mason asked.

Leslie took a step back, looking him up and down. “Who are you?”

“I was just about to ask the same question.” This came from an older man with blond hair—that looked like a bad dye job. Not that Mason knew anything about that, but the color looked so unnatural against the man’s dark complexion, gray eyes, and wrinkles. He wore a pink button-down shirt and a funky blue and pink coat with blue pants. And his shoes. They were pointy things with a slight heel. He pushed out his hip and waved his hand flamboyantly around like a moron. “Models aren’t supposed to be here today. Buddy, we have protocols to follow.”

“He’s not a model.” Isabella let out a long sigh. “He’s my boyfriend.”

The man’s jaw fell open and his hands dropped to his sides. “Well, that’s big news.”

It sure was and Mason wasn’t prepared for that. He swallowed, hard.

“Mason, this is Adrian Bennett.” Isabella smiled and batted her pretty blue eyes, as if she hadn’t just announced anything awkward.

Mason did his best to keep his expression from giving away his shock.

Or maybe horror.

“I don’t mean to be rude through all the introductions,” Mason said, turning his attention to Leslie. “But this package, where is it?”

“I put it in the room we’re using as Isabella’s office and command central, why?” Leslie narrowed her stare. “It’s just a box.”

“With no return address that you weren’t expecting, correct?” Mason puffed out his chest as he took a deep breath. Remaining calm was easy, but keeping his frustration in check proved to be damn near impossible. “Delivered by a stranger?” He planted his hands on his hips. “Does that happen often?”

“I wouldn’t say often,” Leslie said.

“I’d like to see this package.” Mason looped a protective arm around Isabella. If she was to declare them a couple, he might as well play the role.

“Who does this guy think he is?” Adrian whispered.

Mason ignored the tickle in his throat screaming to respond. He needed to balance his job and being the *boyfriend*.

It was an interesting position that Isabella had put him in. One he intended on taking full advantage of.

“Someone who cares about Isabella,” Mason started. “We weren’t going to say anything, so please keep this in the inner circle. I know Isabella trusts you both.” She might, but Mason didn’t trust anyone. However, putting one small piece of information out in the universe shouldn’t come back and bite him in the ass.

Keyword there was *shouldn’t*.

“The other day, someone sent her a threatening note,” Mason said.

Adrian stepped in front of him near a set of double doors. “You haven’t been around very long. That’s not uncommon.

I've gotten two scathing emails this week from contestants in the pageants that feed into this one who didn't make it."

"I've been around long enough to know this one was different." Mason pointed to the doors. "Is the package in there?"

Leslie nodded.

"Just in case, I want everyone to stay in the hallway." For good measure, he lifted Isabella's chin with his thumb and brushed his lips over her mouth, letting the kiss linger longer than a full minute.

Then two.

She tasted like cherries and felt like home. Every cell in his body erupted in a dangerous dance.

Reluctantly, he broke off the kiss. "I'm going to take a peek inside the box. Don't come in until I tell you to."

"Do you have any idea how much I hate it when you get all manly and overprotective? It's annoying." Isabella blinked.

Mason batted her nose. "You knew who I was when we started dating." He turned on his heel, ignoring the wide eyes, gaping mouths, and stunned expressions of Isabella's co-workers. It took enormous self-control not to bust out laughing. But he had a job to do.

"Who the hell is that man?" Leslie said. "I mean, like what does he do?"

"He's retired Air Force," Isabella said. "He gets off on shit like this."

"I wouldn't go that far, babe." Mason pushed open the door and strolled into the large room. He focused on his surroundings, not the thumping of his heart or the stares he could sense from Isabella's co-workers burning a hole in his back. He was used to working under pressure. That he could handle. What made this situation impossible was the gross sensation of being mentally undressed, emotionally judged, and intellectually evaluated. It was downright weird and as much as he enjoyed that kiss, he wished Isabella had told

everyone he was her personal trainer. Or chef. Or even her damn dog walker. Anything other than her fucking boyfriend.

He pushed his thoughts to what he was trained to do. To his right was a sofa and two chairs. Behind those was a bookcase filled with binders and on top of it were a few trophies. Next to that was a table with stacks of paperwork.

To his left were two desks. One had a computer and the other loads of files. The second one also had the package.

He inched closer and examined the box without touching it. It wasn't anything special. A standard brown box taped together with Isabella's full name and the address of the conference center.

No postage.

No return address.

Nothing to indicate where it came from.

Before he did anything else, he texted Sparrow Bishop from the Fool's Gold Sheriff's Office. Even though he'd prefer to have his team in the thick of it, he couldn't blow their cover.

"Why do we have to stand out here like idiots?" Adrian asked in that high-pitched voice that reminded Mason of one of his favorite comedians. A highly inappropriate entertainer, but incredibly funny.

Mason ignored the question and leaned forward, pressing his ear to the box.

"Oh. I don't like that," Adrian said. "Do you really think there could be a—"

"I don't know what to think." Mason didn't want Adrian—or anyone—to say the word *bomb* out loud. It would cause a panic and that was the last thing he needed. "But I don't appreciate it when someone anonymously threatens my girlfriend. Tends to piss me off. I don't like spending my vacation time in a bad mood. Does anyone have any gloves?" No ticking sounds. That was good, but it still didn't mean there wasn't an explosive device.

"I thought you said he was retired?" Leslie whispered.

“I’m a retired captain.” Mason opened and closed three desk drawers before finding a pair of scissors. “I’m currently working for a private security organization.” He had a few friends in the CIA who had worked undercover. They always told him they kept their cover story as close to their personal one as they could. That made keeping track of their lies easier.

“Like a mercenary kind of thing?” Adrian leaned against the doorjamb. A little too close for comfort, and the man’s questions were fucking annoying.

“Not really the right word. But we can go with that.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Gloves? I don’t want my fingerprints on this box. I’ve already texted with the police and they are sending a unit over just in case.”

“Aren’t you efficient.” Adrian jerked his head. “And you know people? How do you know people? If you’re so concerned about this box, shouldn’t we wait for the police?” He flapped his arms like a wild turkey. “Who thinks we should wait for the cops?”

“I think he’s being dramatic,” Leslie said. “It’s not like she hasn’t been sent gifts before. I remember one year some guy sent her roses every day leading up to the pageant. Granted, he was a bit of a whack job and his poems were creepy as hell, but this isn’t all that strange.”

“I take it no one has gloves,” Mason mumbled, doing his best to tune out the peanut gallery. He’d have to keep the touching to a minimum. At least his prints were in the system. The police would easily be able to tell which ones were his and which ones weren’t.

Carefully, he cut through the tape at the sides and then down the center. He kept his breathing slow and shallow. His hands were steady as he flipped the box open and peered inside. “It’s a box of chocolates.”

“Oh. I love chocolate,” Isabella said. “But it goes straight to my hips these days.”

“I like your hips.” He turned and winked. “There’s a note.” Mason reached in and snatched it by the corner, making sure

he barely touched it. “Babe, you’ve got to have something in that purse of yours that I can use to open this. Some sort of makeup thingy or—”

“I’ve got a nail file, brushes, and Q-tips. But also in the top drawer of that desk should be a letter opener.” Isabella handed him a small dark bag with a floral imprint. It reminded him of his sister’s favorite designer bag collection. She had wallets, eyeglass cases, overnight bags, blankets, even shoes from this particular designer. It was insane. Mary Lou would go to the outlets every chance she got and would come home with at least three things from that one store.

He rifled through it, taking the small nail file. He found the letter opener and managed to use both things to open the envelope.

Isabella Carter,

You’re not wanted here. Go back to LA. Or anywhere. But give up Pikes Peak Princess Pageant. You were never the true winner. You’re not the Queen of Pageants. And we don’t want you to ruin this one like you’ve ruined every other one you’ve touched. Go away. Or else.

Or else what?

“Isabella, come here.” He glanced up, catching her gaze. “Everyone else, stay in the hallway, please.”

“Who the hell does this guy think he is? Jack Reacher?” Adrian said with his hands flapping in the air like a peacock.

“Adrian,” Mason said with a stern voice, which probably wasn’t a good idea. But if acting like some action hero was what they saw him as, maybe acting the part would serve him well. “You could look out for the police. I’m hoping the wife of an old buddy of mine is the one who shows up.”

Adrian stuck his head in the room. “Is the note bad? And before you go all Chuck Norris on us, we have the right to know. We’re working here day and night through the pageant. If someone is messing with our girl, we want to help protect her.” He patted his chest. “And ourselves.”

Mason understood enough about the personal dynamics between Isabella, Leslie, and Adrian that he felt comfortable giving them just a tiny bit of what was going on behind the scenes. “It’s a hollow threat and what I mean by that is it’s like when someone says they’re going to pull all their hair out if something doesn’t change. We know they won’t be doing that, but it’s to get a point across. This note has no viable threat. Just get out or else. But that doesn’t mean Isabella shouldn’t take it seriously and we’re still going to follow through with the police.” He looped his arm around her body and kissed her temple.

“I don’t understand why someone is doing this.” She tilted her head, catching his gaze with her powerful blue eyes. “I’m officially nervous,” she whispered.

“We’re going to figure it out. I’m going to call my other team members. I’ll put them on your parents to be safe. I’ll need to insert my men with the security company for the event. It’s going to be okay.” He guided her toward the sofa. “Hey, Leslie, can you go get Isabella some water, please?”

“Sure thing.” Leslie scurried off.

Adrian paced up and down the hallway, mumbling.

Mason kept his arm around Isabella, pulling her tight. “You did an ingenious thing.”

She let out a long breath. “I can’t imagine what that is.”

“Telling them I was your boyfriend. I wish I had thought of that. Although, at first, I was totally caught off guard and not sure how to handle it. But it will allow me to move around a little more freely.”

“I still don’t get how you’re going to insert your friends into my hired security.”

“Oh, that’s easy. The company you hired is owned by Andrew Cotter.” He brushed her hair from the side of her face. She had to be the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on. Even with all the makeup and lashes, her inner person came roaring through.

“I know. He considers himself the best in town. The pageant has used them for years. He’s pushing me to renew his contract. Since I’m making changes, I’m not signing on that dotted line yet, but keeping him here for this year.”

“Ryder and I went to the Air Force Academy with Andrew.”

“It’s a small world,” she said. “I’m not sure what to make of him. He’s kind of strange.”

“He’s a little power hungry, but because I know him, it might make it easier for me to insert Ryder and Cruz in a position of authority. And any other man I might need to bring in.” He ran his hand up and down her arm. “You declaring me your boyfriend gives me a reason to be up in everyone’s business.”

She smiled. “So, you’re going to be one of those overprotective, worrywart, jealous boyfriends, aren’t you?”

He burst out laughing. “I can honestly say I’ve never dated anyone as gorgeous as you, so yeah, I might be one those.”

“You do understand, this is all pretend,” she whispered.

He leaned in, pressing his lips on her cheek. “Actually, it’s not. Someone is threatening you. That part is real and I take it very seriously.”

CHAPTER 6



NORMALLY, shopping would be a great form of therapy. Buying new clothes, whether for herself or someone else, always made her happy. She'd promised Mason that she'd go fishing tomorrow if he wore a tux in the pageant's final night. Of course, that was if she could get his adorable ass on that stage.

She stepped from the elevator and into her new penthouse.

"Jesus. I'm sorry. I have to ask. How do you afford a place like this?" Mason followed her into the apartment.

It was a unique space in the center of downtown Colorado Springs. When it became available to rent, she jumped on the opportunity.

"Does it shock you that I make enough on my pageants and coaching business to live like this?" She set her purse and keys on the small piece of counter in the kitchen. The penthouse was on the twentieth floor and overlooked the city. Every room had a view. The only negative, in her opinion, was the elevator came up the center; therefore, the layout was choppy. It was one big circle with a box in the middle.

That was the only reason she wouldn't buy the place. The owner had been trying to sell. They had renovated it, intending to flip it, but the layout makes it difficult. Not to mention the owner's style. It was a combination of modern and contemporary, with a little western tossed in for good measure. Isabella appreciated it but didn't want to own it. And the kitchen. Oy. It was a hot mess. The appliances were all

replicas from the nineteen fifties. She didn't care that they were state-of-the-art; she wasn't Betty-fucking-Crocker.

But she would call it home for the next few months. That should give her enough time to find a suitable house. Perhaps a little closer to her dad and Leah. One with a backyard so she could get a dog.

“I don't know if shock is the right word. Besides, that was a rude question. I should have never asked it.” He set his camouflage bag on the floor by the island and took a seat on the stool. “Since we're not shopping, I won't hold you to the fishing.”

She laughed. “Oh, we're still getting you a tux and a few other things.” She ran her hand across his shoulders. He wasn't your typical thick, broad, muscled military man. He was tall with a lean, but powerful frame. She squeezed his impressive biceps. It was tight. Hard. Solid. “My friend owns the men's suit store. He's sending over a few things for you to try on.”

“You've got to be kidding me.” Mason groaned, dropping his head to his forearms. “Why is it so important to you that I'm on that stage? I can be in the wings and protect you. Actually, that's where I'd rather be. I might actually have to put my foot down.”

“For the record, it's not just the tux on the last night. This suit coat of yours needs to be updated, especially now that we're playing house.” She strolled to the bar in the next quadrant of the penthouse. Another flawed design. It was as if everything had been done in cubicles. She snagged two glasses and a bottle of her favorite red. Her father would be so disappointed. It was an off-brand and only cost about seventy dollars a bottle. But it was damn good.

She set the glasses on the counter and poured two.

“What does my attire have to do with our fake relationship status? And a new outfit isn't going to help me protect you.”

“Maybe not, but let me have my fun.” She handed him a glass. “You might enjoy it and who knows, maybe you'll like

the clothes.”

“I doubt it. I hate the sport coat as it is. I much prefer my jeans and a T-shirt. I’m a creature of habit. You’re asking me to step way outside my comfort zone. It will be hard enough for me to do my job wearing this thing.” He peeled off his jacket, tossed it over the back side of his stool, and lifted his wine, taking a sip without even swirling or sniffing.

Before she could respond to his whining, the doorbell rang. “That would be Taylor with the selection I asked for.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Besides the pageant having standards for attire, I’d like you to humor me on this. Please.” She batted her eyes and put on her best smile, although she figured that might not work on Mason the same way it worked on other men. While he’d kissed her sweetly, and with intent, it wasn’t real. He’d done it for show, but her response was all about her attraction. He was there to do a job. Even if he did find her attractive, they couldn’t be more opposite.

“I’ll try them on, but I won’t promise to wear anything.”

“I’ll take it.” She raced off to the front door. Excitement rose from her toes, filling every cell in her body. Visions of Mason parading around in all the fashions Taylor had handpicked from his store danced in her head like sugar plums. She yanked open the door. “Taylor,” she exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Wow.” Taylor held out his arms. “You look fabulous.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek, giving her his famous barely a hug. It was light with a single tap on her back before he took a step away. He wasn’t one for long embraces.

“You’re sweet to say so, considering I haven’t had a chance to touch up my makeup since two this afternoon. My lipstick has worn off and I’m sure my nose needs a good powdering.”

“You could wear a potato sack with nothing but lashes and still look stunning.” Taylor was an older gentleman with silver hair and stunning blue eyes. He was closer to her father’s age and had been dressing the models and contestants of the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant for as long as she could remember.

He'd also become her dad's source for all his suits. Taylor dressed all society members in Colorado Springs, including the Sinclair family. He was the go-to for all fashion needs when a red carpet, the press, or any flashy charity function was involved.

"Flattery will get you nowhere with me." She opened the door wide, giving him space to roll in his clothing rack. It had twelve garment bags neatly dangling from the top. She rubbed her hands together. "I can't wait to see what you brought my boyfriend." Her heart fluttered at the way the word *boyfriend* sizzled on her tongue. She hadn't meant to say it, but it just tumbled out. Granted, Mason had told her to make sure she continued with the charade. He went as far as to call her dad to inform him of their new status. He thought it best if they played it up, but he told her to inform everyone not to leak it to the press. He didn't want the fanfare and she could understand why.

"Boyfriend?" Taylor waggled his brows. "That's news."

"Yes, but we don't want to announce it. So, please, don't go blabbing, okay?"

"My lips are sealed." Taylor rolled his rack around the corridor. "Where do you want this? Oh, and I love your new digs. This place has been on the market for a while. I'm surprised they leased it."

"The master. It's down this hall all the way at the end." She pointed. "It's still for sale. But they needed the money, so they agreed to rent it to me for six months. After that, if I don't find a place and the owners haven't sold, I can rent month-to-month. But I'm confident I'll be able to secure a suitable home before that. This is temporary."

"Temporary or not, it's flipping gorgeous." Taylor planted his hands on his hips. "Do I get to meet this boyfriend before I watch him undress?"

"Put your stuff in the master bedroom and then follow the hallway to the right. It will land you in the kitchen. I'll pour you a nice big glass of red wine."

“You’re a doll.” Taylor blew her a kiss before running off toward her bedroom.

She turned and immediately frowned as Mason had strolled into the hallway. “What?” She stared at Mason, who had a grim expression.

“I’m not trying on clothes with that man in the same room.”

She covered her mouth and laughed. “No. You’re not. I’ll go back with you and go through the outfits. Then you’ll put on a fashion show.”

Mason lifted his wine and downed a full glass in two gulps.

Oddly impressive.

“That’s not happening.” Mason leaned against the wall. His normal casual demeanor had changed to something akin to annoyance with his tight facial features.

She cleared her throat. “I need to approve of the outfits and I want Taylor’s opinion. He’s the best in the business.”

“I don’t care. I haven’t even agreed to this insane idea of being on stage with you.”

“I need an escort. I’ve already told people within my inner circle you’re my boyfriend. I’ve done this before. They will be expecting it. Besides, don’t you want to be glued to my hip?”

“Don’t use my words against me to get what you want. I hate that.” He turned, took the five steps toward the kitchen, and aggressively set the glass on the counter. “You can see the outfits. I’ll let you decide. But I’m not prancing around this penthouse for your amusement.”

She raced to his side and curled her fingers around his biceps. The last thing she wanted to do was make him feel uncomfortable. “I was trying to have some fun. Who doesn’t like a little shopping?”

“Me.” He glared. “I hate it. I avoid it at all costs. As a matter of fact, because I wear the same things and know what fits, I order most things online.”

“Well, some of these might need a quick alteration and Taylor will need to do some measurements for that. So the ones we do pick, he’ll need to see.” She smoothed her hand across his shoulder. “Look. The threatening emails haven’t fazed me much. I get them all the time. And at first, the rock through the window, I honestly didn’t think too much about it. But now that someone has slashed my tire and sent me a random box of chocolates with that odd note, it’s rattled me. It takes a lot to do that.”

He lifted her chin with his thumb. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Me and my team will figure this out and we will catch whoever is doing this. My job is to protect you. Not dress like a monkey.”

A warmth wrapped her skin like a fur coat. She lost herself in his dark-blue eyes. Her muscles froze as she held his gaze. They longed to be touched. Caressed. Kissed. “The pageant has certain standards and dress codes. If you’re going to be part of it—as my boyfriend and escort—I need you to wear more than that jacket over there. And you do need to wear a tux to certain events.” Without really thinking about the gesture, or what it meant, she palmed his cheek. “I’m begging you to do this.”

“I get the impression not many people say no to you.” He tucked a few pieces of hair behind her ear.

She didn’t let anyone touch her hair. She worked tirelessly to make sure every strand was perfect and in its place. Her hair was one of her best features and she didn’t like anyone to mess with it, and yet this was the second time he’d done it and she allowed it without saying a single word. As if it were normal for him to do so. What really got under her skin was that she liked it. No other man she’d ever been with had quite the gentle or sweet touch that Mason had. He was a bit of an oxymoron. Rugged and bullish on the outside. But soft and gooey in the middle.

“I will admit I’m used to getting my way, but I do know how to take no for an answer.” She tapped the center of his chest. “This isn’t one of those times. I need you to do this to make my pageant—and me—look good. There are people who

like to see me fail. Who believe I'm ruining this pageant by making the changes that I have planned."

"You mean Herb and Gretta."

She nodded. "There are a few others. You've read about them in that file of yours, I'm sure."

"I have. But they are the most vocal about it. At least with the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant." Mason rested his hands on her shoulders, running his thumbs across the sides of her neck.

"Please, Mason. I need you to do this for me."

"All right." He kissed her forehead. His lips were hot and lingered for a full minute.

She closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like to wake up in his arms.

"I'm all... oh, sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt a private moment," Taylor said.

"No worries." Mason looped an arm around her waist and extend the other. "I'm Mason. The boyfriend."

"So I gathered." Taylor smiled. "Everything's set up in the master. I can't wait to see some of these on you. When Isabella sent your picture over, I thought, I can work with that. But seeing you in person." Taylor kissed his fingertips, making a loud smacking noise. "Well, just wow."

Mason groaned.

"Come on, honey. Let's go see what Taylor brought for you." Isabella gave Mason a good shove. "We'll let you know which ones we're keeping."

"What, no fashion show?"

"Absolutely not." Mason stomped off down the hallway.

"He's a little shy." Isabella smiled weakly.

"No idea why. That man is smoking hot." Taylor fanned himself. "If I were into men, I'd be fighting you for him."

She tilted her head, catching a glimpse of Mason as he stepped into the master. "Only, I'm going to have to fix that

walk of his.”

“I don’t know. I like his strut. It’s different. Manly. Sexy. But not overstated. It says something without being in your face.”

“Good point.” Time to go see what Mason looked like with something other than an average sport coat.



MASON STARED at himself in the full-length mirror. “It’s pink.” He opened the sport coat, which by itself wasn’t bad. It was navy blue and other than the fact the material felt softer and smoother and the price tag was triple what he paid for the one in the kitchen, he still didn’t get why he needed a new one. From a distance, who could tell?

“It’s salmon.” Isabella came up behind him, running her fingers across his shoulders, down his back, smoothing the coat over his ass.

He loved the way her long, fake fingernails grazed his body. He’d never dated anyone with nails like that. Not that they were actually dating. He needed to get that thought right out of his head. He was her bodyguard. Her protector. And he was there to solve a puzzle. Not get involved with a beauty queen.

Not his type.

At all.

“The shirt is fucking pink. I don’t wear pink unless it’s a jersey and it’s for a good cause.”

“How do the slacks fit?” She wrapped her glorious arms around his body and dared to tug at his waistband.

He jerked. “Fine. Perfect. But I’m not wearing this goddamn shirt.”

“It looks great with your skin tone. And it also fits you splendidly. We’ll get you a white one. A light-blue one. This color. And then depending on what other sport coat and the dress I’m wearing, maybe a light lavender and—”

“Oh, hell no. Just white. White is fine. I like white.”

“You need to match my outfits, and I haven’t picked all of them yet.”

“You’re killing me, Isabella.” He turned, shedding the sport coat and snagging another off the rack. This one happened to be black.

“I figure three or four of these pants. Two solid coats and two with subtle patterns and all the shirts. That should do it for everything but the final night.” She cupped his face. “You’re so handsome and look incredibly sexy in these.”

“I look like an idiot, and my team is going to razz the hell out of me, especially when they will be working backstage security in a uniform more suitable to what we’re accustomed to.” It wasn’t just that Mason would be wearing clothes that made him feel like he was trying to be something he wasn’t, but his buddies would have the freedom to be comfortable. To be themselves while he pretended to be Isabella’s boyfriend.

In less than two days, a single woman had gotten under his skin like no other.

His sister was having a field day with this one up in heaven. The idea that he looked for female companionship in all the wrong places he’d laughed off his entire life. Who didn’t want to have someone who had all the same interests? But Mary Lou believed he treated women like buddies, not partners.

Isabella cupped his face. “You’re playing the part of my boyfriend and escort. During all the dress rehearsals and hanging out at the conference center, you can wear jeans and a T-shirt. But anywhere else, I’d like you to please wear these clothes. Oh, and I had Taylor bring over some of these.” She pulled a few things off the rack.

“What the hell are those?” Mason blinked.

“Long-sleeved shirts for if we go out to dinner somewhere.” She cocked her head. “I’m getting them for you, so just say thank you.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re impossible?” He wasn’t about to argue with her. Not tonight. It was too exhausting. He’d take the clothes, keep the tags on them, and when this assignment was over, he’d give them back so she could return them. He took one of the shirts and held it across his chest, checking it out in the mirror. He arched a brow. “It’s not that bad.”

“Told you.” She patted his ass. “Time for the monkey suit. Now, you have your choice of a cummerbund or a vest.”

“Cruz made me wear a cummerbund at his wedding and I hated it. So, let’s try the vest.” For whatever reason, Mason’s attitude took a quick adjustment. He didn’t know if it was Isabella’s sexy smile, her sweet, tender touch, or the idea he actually liked the way the clothes felt and looked on his body. He wasn’t excited about trying on the tuxedo. He honestly didn’t want to wear it. But he did want to show it to Isabella. He liked making her eyes twinkle.

Fuck. The last time a woman made him all weird had been the twelfth of never.

“Okay. It’s all set up in the bathroom. If you need help. Let me know.”

Mason closed the door and stared at the tux. Flashes of Cruz’s wedding filled his brain. It had been a fun party, full of happiness and joy. Too bad his good buddy was being a stupid fool, tossing it all away by filing for divorce. Mason knew it wasn’t what Cruz really wanted, but Cruz had let his emotions get the better of him.

But there wasn’t anything Mason could say or do to change Cruz’s mind, not for lack of trying. Currently, that weighed heavily on his mind.

As quickly as he could, he buttoned the vest and slipped his arms through the tux coat. He took a look in the mirror in Isabella’s massive bathroom. It wasn’t full-length, but he could see enough. “Mary Lou, if you could see me now,” he whispered. He tugged at the coat. The sleeves were a little long, but otherwise, it looked as though it fit right. However, he knew shit about fancy clothes. “All right. Here I come.” He

pushed open the door and winced. There was a part of him that couldn't believe he'd gone through all the outfits and all the fuss.

He reminded himself it was for Isabella. For the job. That he was doing what was required of him as an employee of the Brotherhood Protectors.

“Holy shit.” Isabella jumped up from the edge of her bed and for the first time since he'd met her, she wobbled on her heels.

He reached out and caught her with his arm, tugging her to his chest. “You okay?”

“I'm wonderful and you look amazing.” Her eyes twinkled and her smile was bright. “I don't think we need to try on any of the other tuxes. This is the one.”

“If you say so.”

She laced her hands behind his neck. “I should have asked you this question before I went and told everyone we were an item, but do you have a girlfriend? Wife?”

He chuckled. “Neither. If you ask the last girl I dated, I'm emotionally unavailable and treated her like I did the guys on my team. I actually didn't understand why that was a problem. They're family.” He gripped Isabella's hips.

She wasn't a skinny, model-like woman. She had curves in all the right places and there was no denying her beauty. Or her intelligence. She had a sense of humor and her confidence was through the roof. He admired her grit and determination.

But she was everything he didn't want in a woman.

Isabella tilted her head and batted her lashes. It was a mesmerizing motion. “How can you not understand what a problem that is?”

Mason rolled his eyes. “Okay, so maybe girlfriends should be a bit more special than friends.” He wrapped his arms tighter, wanting to feel her muscles mold to his frame. “But still, a relationship shouldn't be work. It should be easy.”

“That’s boring and unrealistic.” She leaned her chest against his body. “Being in an honest relationship is like a river. Sometimes it’s wild and crazy. Other times the flow is slow, smooth, and calm. Relationships have twists and turns that catch you when you least expect it. Often, you can’t see around the corners and that’s exciting and scary. Sure, there are straight-as-an-arrow parts and we need those moments to catch our breaths.”

“So, what you’re saying is your experience with men is that we’re as unpredictable as we are predictable.”

“I didn’t mean for you to take that personally. I was just reacting to what you said and suggesting that even a girl who is the complete opposite of me likes to be treated like a lady by her man.”

“Point taken.” He knew he should let her go. Holding her a second longer could get him into trouble. The kind of trouble that he couldn’t bounce back from and that could put him in hot water with his new boss. His breath caught in his throat. It was too late. There was no turning back. He pressed his lips over hers and savored the way she caved to his touch, practically melting into his arms.

This was not a kiss for show, like in the convention center. There was nothing pretend about it, at least for him. He slipped in his tongue, grabbing hers, swirling it around in a hot dance, doing his best to be as *unpredictable* as possible. He had no desire to let go, but he had to. “We shouldn’t be doing this,” he whispered. “You’re a beautiful woman and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t attracted to you. But this is my job.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment.” She took two steps back, licking her plump lips. “This is the only outfit that needs any alterations, so let’s go show this to Taylor so he can be on his way.” She turned on her heel and sashayed out the door.

Fuck. He didn’t handle that well. Nothing like insulting the woman he was hired to protect. If things weren’t already awkward, they were going to be a lot worse.

CHAPTER 7



MASON PAUSED in the hallway of the convention center. He adjusted his new shirt over his stylish slacks. He hated to admit even to himself not only how comfortable they were, but that he actually liked how they fit.

“What’s wrong?” Isabella rested her hand on the inside of his arm. “Are you bothered by what everyone has been whispering about us already? I’m sorry. I didn’t realize my announcement about us would spread so quickly.”

“No. That’s fine. Me being your boyfriend gains me access to more things. No one is going to question my presence.” He squared his shoulders. “This is going to sound stupid, but I’m preparing myself for the razzing I’m about to get from my buddies.”

“About what?”

He laughed. “My new attire.” He glanced down at his shoes and wiggled his feet. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into these things. The rest I can almost live with, but these? No idea how I’m going to run in clown shoes if I have to.”

“You practiced running up and down my hallways and then in the parking garage all morning. You did fine.”

“Perhaps, but I look like an idiot.”

“You’d look foolish if you had worn those combat boots of yours with this outfit.” She gave him a good hip check, knocking him off-balance and into the wall.

“Damn, babe, we’re not on the ice.” Part of him resented how at ease he felt with Isabella and all her glitz and glam—as she called it. When he’d waltzed into her kitchen this morning for coffee, he’d been surprised to see her in a fancy robe, high-heeled slippers, and full makeup, lashes and all. She had to have been up for hours to maintain that look at seven in the morning. He desperately wanted to see what she looked like the second she opened her eyes. He could picture it in his mind and it was stunning.

“Come on. Your friends are waiting and I want to hear their report. Besides, I have a lot of work to do today.”

“And then fishing. Don’t forget fishing.”

She let out a long breath. “How can I forget when you remind me of it every five minutes.”

He looped his arm around her waist and gave her a little shove toward the door. Sucking in a deep breath, he strolled into the room she used as an office. Being the man in charge came with a certain set of responsibilities that Mason hadn’t welcomed with open arms. The need to feel comfortable in his own skin while taking on that lead position had been a necessity. When he’d been in the military, he had his fatigues to give him a sense of security.

In the team room at the Brotherhood Protectors, he had his knee hockey stick and puck.

And Ryder.

He’d always been Mason’s moral compass. Whenever Mason felt like he’d been wedged between a rock and a hard place, all he had to do was glance in Ryder’s direction. On the ice, Ryder might have been between the posts as his goalie, but his presence was what allowed him to shine. On a mission, he could count on Ryder for advice and guidance. A simple nod of his head was all Mason needed.

But this was the first time he was leading his team outside of the military and everything felt different.

Ryder and Cruz had made themselves comfortable on the sofa. It was Cruz who looked up first. He didn’t laugh, but his

jaw dropped open and his eyes widened. “Holy shit,” he exclaimed as he let his gaze glide up and down Mason. “Should we start calling you Ken?”

“Shut up,” Mason mumbled. While he knew his buddy was just busting his balls, this was the last thing he needed. Cruz was a good man. The best. He was a natural born leader and Mason had never once questioned him when he’d been team leader. Cruz also had an uncanny ability to slip into his current role with ease and grace. He didn’t have a problem with Mason taking the lead and Mason knew his comments weren’t meant to rattle him or even meant mean-spirited. But they all had jobs, and Mason was doing his best to make the Brotherhood Protectors proud with this first assignment.

And his sister.

He couldn’t fail.

Ryder arched a brow. “This reminds me of when you were madly in love with that girl when you were sixteen. You got all decked out in some silly outfit to take her roller-skating. I believe Mary Lou helped you with it.”

“I remember that,” Cruz said. “You wanted to impress her. Show her that you weren’t some goon with a puck and stick. What the hell was her name?”

“Julie, not that it matters.” Mason sat on the edge of the desk. “And this is nothing like that. Like I told you last night, I’m playing a role. Doing my job. So let’s get off my outfit and get to work.”

“I love it when you get all team leader on me,” Ryder said as he flashed his best wicked grin and nodded. “But I have to say something about the shoes. I mean, I have to ask, are they comfortable?”

Mason picked up a pad of paper from the desk, ripped off a sheet, wadded it up, and tossed it across the room at his buddy, wishing it were a puck.

With the quick reflexes of a goalie, Ryder batted it away before it landed right between his eyes.

“What do we know about the tire slashing?” Mason asked. It was time to bench the razzing, the odd looks, the friendships, and focus on the task at hand. When they’d all been a team in the military, their roles were closely knitted together. Mason might have been team leader, and he might have outranked Asher and Kent, but they were all on equal footing. In some ways, that had shifted. Mason had not only been named the leader of Team Watchdog, but this was his assignment. His protection detail. Everything was his call. It was a responsibility he took seriously regardless of what he wore.

“Very little,” Cruz said. “CSI is working with the Brotherhood Protectors. So far, all we know is that it was a clean cut made by one of five potential knives that are fairly common. They are trying to narrow it down, but it might be a needle in a haystack situation at this point.”

“How about the security system at Isabella’s parents’ house?” Mason asked.

“Up and running.” Cruz nodded. “Asher and Kent have arrived and they are on protection detail with David and Leah. They are awaiting orders on what else they can do.”

“I’m sure that will soothe my stepmother’s mind.” Isabella eased into the big leather seat behind her desk, crossing her legs at her ankles. She wore skintight slacks that hugged her body, showing off every curve.

Mason enjoyed the look but didn’t appreciate that every man with a pulse turned their head as she passed.

And her top didn’t leave much to the imagination. While it covered her completely, it stretched across her breasts a little too tightly.

“What about the box of chocolates?” Mason wanted to get the checklist out of the way and move on to new business. Anything to keep his mind focused on his job, and not the woman.

“The prints that the CSI team could isolate were yours, Leslie’s, Adrian’s, and the delivery person,” Cruz said. “I’m

heading over there to interview him after this meeting is over. It's a legit company, so hopefully we can isolate where the package originated from." Cruz lifted his hand. "You should be aware that the chocolate had been tampered with and the CSI team found a substance inside the chocolate that would have made Isabella sick. It wouldn't have harmed her, but it would have made her violently ill."

Mason glanced over his shoulder. "What kind of substance?"

"Eye drops," Cruz said. "According to the techs, it was enough to make Isabella vomit and have stomach cramps for hours. Possibly even force her to go to the hospital."

"I can't believe anyone would do that." For the first time since Mason had met Isabella, her voice trembled.

He pushed from the corner of the desk and made his way behind her chair, resting his hands on her shoulders, giving them a friendly squeeze, ignoring the amused looks from his friends. "I'm sorry, Isabella. I don't mean to scare you more, but this shit got real. We need to have all hands on deck to secure this event or cancel it."

"That is out of the question." She swiveled and glared. "I will not be bullied."

"All right. But that means doing everything my way. That starts with making some changes around here."

She narrowed her stare. "Like what?"

"For starters, Ryder will be in charge of security," Mason said. "He'll work with Andrew, whom we know personally, but Ryder, Cruz, and I will be calling the shots. Andrew and his crew will be answering to us. We are no longer here to support them. It's the other way around. We will need to put Asher and Kent in the rotation. I want my men at this event at all times."

"I've got a meeting with him in a half hour," Ryder interjected. "I know Cruz will be unavailable to attend, but I was hoping you could." He glared at Mason. It was rare that

Ryder gave any pushback when it came to Mason's decisions. "There's a reason you're team leader and I'm not."

"In the military we had the same rank. We're equals, so don't start pulling that crap on me again. I need to be wherever Isabella is, and she's got a meet and greet this morning with contestants, then a meeting with her team and the Sinclair Foundation. I will try to catch what I can of your chat with Andrew. Otherwise, you work out the details and report back. Find the weak spots and make sure we have everything covered. As a team, we'll make adjustments if we have to." Mason had always hated this part of his job. When Cruz had taken his promotion to lieutenant colonel, leaving Mason as team leader, he wanted to defer it to Ryder.

However, the powers that be put Mason in charge. They believed he had what it took to lead the team in whatever battles came their way. It wasn't that Ryder wasn't capable, but he'd been told by his superiors that the dynamics of the team were such that Mason was the better choice.

When they took the job with the Brotherhood Protectors, the team came over intact with the same roles. Mason was forced to make the tough decisions and Ryder, while he never wanted the role, often made his opinions clear. He did that when he either felt as though he was being forced into a leadership role he didn't want or when he believed Mason was backing down from his.

This was neither of those.

"Andrew is going to be a dick. We both know how he operates. He says he's a *from the top down* kind of man and you're the top," Ryder said. "But he's going to feel as though we're stepping on his turf, and he's going to want to have a nice long discussion with you, whether or not you attend that meeting."

"Well, we both know how he feels about me. Taking orders from you will sting less."

"Not necessarily. But before I go in, I need to know if we are giving him full intel or partial. I need to know what I can and can't say going into the meeting." Ryder lowered his chin,

holding Mason's stare. It wasn't a combative glare. Far from it. It was the kind of look that was meant to ease Mason's growing discomfort. To show him that Ryder wasn't challenging his authority but being his super supportive self by helping Mason delegate and navigate these new territories.

Mason should have never questioned Ryder's intentions.

They had been each other's ride-or-die companions since they were ten. Whenever Mason had needed backup, Ryder had been there. If Mason had gotten himself into trouble, Ryder was right there by his side. There hadn't been a time in Mason's life where Ryder hadn't been.

Ryder had supported Mason through all of his hockey aspirations, including going to play Juniors in Canada. It had been Ryder who flew to Buffalo to be with Mason when Mary Lou died. Cruz had come too, but it had been Ryder who held Mason through the night as he cried like a baby, blaming himself for his sister's death. Growing up, Ryder had crushed hard on Mary Lou. While she was never interested in Ryder, she'd always been kind to him and treated him with respect. They had formed a bond over the years and her death had affected Ryder deeply.

"I don't want him or his team to know everything. Keep things simple, without detail. I will need his roster. We can send that to Darius and have him do a full Brotherhood Protector background check on everyone."

"Might I suggest we do that on all employees at the pageant?" Cruz added.

"Good point, but that's going to take time. I'll make sure Isabella forwards that list to you and Darius. You can follow through with that one." Mason stepped to the side of the chair, leaning on the desk, ignoring Cruz's frown. He was the weather guy. He preferred to deal with patterns in the atmosphere, not doing research on people. But that's where Mason needed him right now and he wasn't going to deal with his buddies giving him shit about anything. "For now, we can go on the assumption that the pageant will go on as scheduled."

“Under no circumstance will I ever cancel.” Isabella placed both hands flat on the desktop. “That candy would not have killed me. You said so yourself. I wouldn’t have even eaten it. These threats are meant to scare me. I will not let fear run my life.”

Mason pinched the bridge of his nose. Perhaps his strong-arm approach to management this time around wasn’t working. “I’m not asking you to.” He let out an exasperated sigh. “My job is to make sure nothing happens to you or anyone else in this pageant. In order for me to keep everyone safe, we need to be diligent in our preparations. We have limited time to do that, so I need full cooperation.”

“Understood.” Cruz rose, glancing at his watch. “I best be on my way. I’ll touch base after the interview.”

“Get with Asher and Kent. They can help with sorting out Andrew’s employees.” Mason shifted, catching Isabella’s gaze. “Would it be okay for me to have a team meeting at your parents’ house tonight? That way you and your folks are all in one place, making it easier for my men.”

“I don’t see why not. Leah loves to entertain.” Isabella smiled weakly. “I know it wouldn’t be a party, but let her do her thing with food and whatnot. It will make her feel good.”

“That’s fine.” Mason nodded.

“As long as there isn’t a dress code,” Cruz said. “Because this is all I brought.” He waved a hand over his jeans and shirt.

Mason couldn’t help it, he laughed. “Some nicer clothes wouldn’t hurt you.”

Cruz rolled his eyes. “I’ll see you later.” He disappeared into the hallway.

Two ladies peeked their head into the office.

“Excuse me,” the older woman said. “May we have a word with Isabella?”

“Hi, Jenna.” Isabella jumped out of her seat and rushed to the doorway. She gave Jenna a hug. “It’s been a long time. How are you?”

“Good. Good,” Jenna said. “I don’t know if you remember my daughter Jessel.”

“How could I forget.” Isabella shook Jessel’s hand. “It’s nice to see you again. Come on in and take a seat. I’ve got a few minutes.”

Mason narrowed his stare. He wasn’t about to leave Isabella alone with anyone on his potential suspect list, and while Jenna wasn’t high on that list, she had still made the cut. He inched closer to Isabella and cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry. Jenna, this is my boyfriend, Mason.” Isabella looped her arm through his and smiled. “Over there is his friend Ryder. He works for the security firm that was hired for the event.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you both.” It was hard to believe that Jenna was Jessel’s mother. She didn’t look to be a day over thirty and Jessel, with all the makeup, hair, and mature clothing, appeared to be in her twenties. But from the paperwork, Mason knew Jessel was only seventeen. Even so, Jenna had to have been a baby herself when she had Jessel. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I really need to speak with Isabella privately.”

“Sweetheart, can you give us a few minutes?” Isabella glanced up, batting her thick fake lashes.

“I need to chat with Mason anyway,” Ryder interjected. “We’ll be in the hallway if you need us.”

With a quick shift of his eyes, Mason gave the girls a once-over. They weren’t carry anything with them. Not even a purse. Of course, there were places on their body they could have hidden things, but everyone who entered the building had to go through a security checkpoint. That included being scanned for weapons.

Mason knew that didn’t necessarily mean that someone wasn’t smart enough to sneak one in, but he also understood that he would have to give Isabella a little space to perform her job. This was one of those times. He kissed her cheek. “I’ll be right outside the door, babe.”

“Thank you.” She patted his chest.

Mason stepped into the hallway and leaned against the wall. Ryder joined him, doing the same on the opposite side.

“You play the boyfriend role well,” Ryder said. “Perhaps a little too easy. Is there something you want to share?”

“Not really.” Mason sighed. He wasn’t one to keep things from Ryder. Ever. Since they’d been chosen on their first squirt team, they’d told each other everything. They’d gotten caught sneaking out of school together and whenever the other needed an ear, they were there for one another.

No questions asked.

“I’m not going to razz you about the clothes. Or even the fast change in demeanor because I honestly like it when you fill out your leadership shoes.” He glanced down. “Though those clown things on your feet are hard to look at.”

Mason chuckled. “I can get used to the shirt and slacks, but these...” He lifted his right leg and wiggled his foot. “Well, these things are just plain weird.”

“You can say that again, but seriously, what the hell is going on with you and Isabella? Because I know you, man, and that’s not a role you’re playing. You like her.”

“She’s not my type.”

“Dude, you don’t even know what your type is because you date women that are like—”

“If you say men, I’m going to pop you right between your beady little eyes.”

“But you know it’s true.”

“Come on. You like women who are outdoorsy. You want a girl who likes to hike and fish and all the stuff I like too,” Mason said.

“Of course I do, but I also like a lady who has a sense of style. Who looks like a woman when we go out. Who isn’t my buddy, like you. I love you, man. But I don’t want to sleep with you.”

Mason's lips curled into a smile. "Ah, but we've slept in the same bed." He waggled his brow. "On more than one occasion and if my memory serves correctly, you're the one who crawled in my bed."

"We were like twelve. At hockey camp. I was stuck in the other cabin with a bunch of dipshits. You're the one who told me to come to your cabin. And as I recall, the whole thing is how I got switched to your team and your cabin. So, fuck off." Ryder shook his head. "Just admit it, you have the hots for Isabella."

Mason ran a hand through his hair. It was longer than he'd ever let it grow since he was a teenager. It felt strange through his fingers. "I'll give you that I find her attractive. But we have a job to do." He waved his hand over his body. "All this is for show."

"I get that. But you don't fake emotions. As a matter of fact, you wear them on your sleeve. And no one knows you better than I do. No one. You might be able to fool Asher and Kent, maybe even Cruz, but you can't pull the wool over my eyes. You're starting to fall for that girl. I can see just by the way you look at her. Talk to her. The way you behave around her. It's different from any other woman I've seen you with."

"Perhaps that's because I've been charged to protect her."

"I know that's why you're taking this role as team leader so seriously and in part why you came down so hard on us in that briefing. But it's also because you've started to care for her and the sooner you admit that—even if it's just to yourself—you'll be less of an ass."

"Was I really that big of a dick in there?" Mason asked.

"Just a little." Ryder lifted his hand, making the inch sign. "I understand where it's coming from. I'm not sure Cruz gets it. He came off like he did at the end, maybe putting two and two together regarding Mary Lou, but I doubt he saw what I did."

Ryder was the only one who ever dared to bring Mary Lou's death into any equation. Everyone knew that Mason felt

responsible. That was no secret. He'd been the one driving. It didn't matter that the accident hadn't been his fault. He'd demanded that he drive because of the weather. If he'd let his sister drive, he would have been the one who died and that reality was something he struggled with to this day. It factored into every decision he made regarding people he cared about.

And it was why he needed Ryder at his side. Ryder was the one who pointed out at every turn when Mason was putting protecting everyone else but himself first, when he should be thinking about the whole.

"What exactly did you see?" Mason asked.

"A man who cares about a woman more than a protection detail." Ryder raised his hand. "That's not a judgment nor am I implying that's a bad thing. But for the sake of our assignment, I believe it's best for you to at least acknowledge what you're feeling. Understand that it's happening, because you can't control that."

"Sure I can. I'm not going to act on an attraction."

Ryder lowered his chin. "I believe you already have."

"Nothing has happened." Mason closed his eyes for the count of five. "Except maybe a kiss." He couldn't lie to his best friend. "It was brief and I got caught up in—hell, I have no idea. But it won't happen again. She's way too flashy for my taste."

"Bullshit," Ryder said. "Look. I don't give a shit if you get tangled up with Isabella. It might not be the most professional thing you could do, but if we weren't on assignment, I'd push you hard to do it. She brings out a side of you that I haven't seen in a long time. She's good for you. I can see that. Just make sure you're not letting the past creep up on you." Ryder pushed from the wall and closed the gap. He squeezed Mason's shoulder. "I know how much you hate it when I say this and I won't bring it up again. Trust your instincts. Don't second-guess them. They are always the right ones. You can't know what the outcome of a different decision would have been. They could have always been worse."

Mason pulled Ryder close, giving him a brotherly-hockey-man hug. It lasted all of two seconds. He appreciated the words and desperately wanted to believe them, but it wouldn't bring his sister back.



ISABELLA LEFT the door ajar before rolling her leather chair to the center of the room. She preferred sitting in it over any other piece of furniture in the makeshift office. It gave her a sense of power.

Jenna and Jessel sat on the sofa, practically in each other's lap. Jenna held her daughter's hand, and they both sported a frown that made them look constipated.

"The meet and greet is in twenty minutes," Isabella said. "I only have a few minutes. What can I do for you ladies?"

"Normally, we'd deal with any concerns we had about the pageant at that gathering, but this is an uncomfortable situation," Jenna said. "And it's twofold."

Isabella rested her hands on her lap. "I'm listening."

"There has been a lot of chatter about the change in ownership and some of the changes you've already made. Some girls aren't as excited as we are about those changes."

Isabella struggled to believe that this was what Jenna wanted to talk about, considering what Jessel had done in the past. "Do you mind if I ask, what specifically are the issues?" Isabella raised her hand. "I'm not looking for who's complaining. I only want to know what the contestants are worried about. This way, I can address them head-on."

"Scoring for one," Jenna said. "In the past, this pageant was heavily rated on the swimsuit, evening gown, and beauty marks. Now, you've placed those events at the bottom, focusing more on the interview. Increasing points on what the girls bring to the table and possibly including their past. For example, we heard you're looking at their social profiles and what they've done for their community. Don't you think bringing that into this pageant is unfair now?"

“First off, that’s not a huge percentage of the scoring, and that has more to do with scholarships that will be awarded than who wins the title. Also, I will be covering that in the meet and greet.” Isabella knew there would be backlash regarding her shift from all beauty and poise to the interview. It happened in every pageant she ran. While the swimsuit and evening gown had traditionally been a big part of all pageants and essential because how a lady carried herself across the stage said a lot about her personality, it didn’t represent the entire package.

Isabella put pageant contestants into three categories. Girls who did pageants for the sake of doing them. They wanted to win. Desired the crown. They had no end game past where the pageants would take them through their youth. They didn’t see pageants as anything other than something they did for fun or a temporary thing. These contestants didn’t see the full value of where pageants could take them. Isabella harbored no ill will toward these young ladies. Pageants weren’t for them in the long haul and they all eventually dropped out before they landed in the bigger ones.

The second group was the one Isabella resented most. All they cared about was winning. Getting that crown. They would beg, borrow, and steal to get it. They wanted what it offered, but they did nothing to give back. It was all self-serving, which wasn’t what pageants were about. These girls wanted the spotlight. The glory. But they didn’t want the responsibility that went with it.

The final category was what made pageants great. These women used pageants as a platform to not only better themselves, but to try to make a difference in the world. To make positive changes. Pageants helped them become empowered women with purpose. They used them to not only better themselves, but to better the world.

Jenna had fallen into the first category. Her heart had never been in pageants for the long haul. By the time she’d turned eighteen, she’d lost any love she’d had for them and it was time for her to bow out gracefully.

And she did just that.

Isabella didn't know enough about Jessel to understand what she wanted from pageants. She knew even less about why Jenna pushed her daughter as hard as she did. Sometimes it was hard to tell where a child stood, especially when their mother had come from the pageant world. However, considering Jessel's poor judgment in a previous pageant, Isabella could understand why Jenna was concerned. Jessel's action would prevent her from being given a scholarship this year and could affect the judges' perception of her during the entire process.

"It's just that coming into the pageant, all the contestants prepared a certain way. Their coaches worked with them on the specifics of how things would be scored, focusing on, well, other aspects than what you've stated the judges will be looking at. I'm not sure my daughter will be given a fair assessment."

"Jenna, we've known each other a long time, so I'm going to speak frankly about past indiscretions." Isabella shifted her gaze to Jessel. She wasn't going to give Jenna a chance to argue. Jessel was seventeen and the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant fed into the Miss Colorado. The pageant world was small with a long memory. People talked and if they thought they could sweep her actions under the rug, they were sorely mistaken. "Jessel, you've been punished for your poor decisions. Having a title stripped might feel harsh, but imagine how you would have felt if someone had taken your talent costume—"

"It's not fair that everyone keeps bringing that up," Jenna said with venom dripping from every syllable. She clenched her hands tightly together. "My daughter apologized. She paid the price for her actions. It's done. She shouldn't have to keep paying for it at every turn. At least five girls in this pageant have done nasty things to other contestants. I don't hear anyone else whispering about those indiscretions."

"I can assure you that Jessel's scores in specific categories won't be judged on past events." Isabella could only hope the judges wouldn't hold it against Jessel, but the human factor did play a part in judging. She personally interviewed every

single judge, doing her best to make sure she'd have the cream of the crop. But this year, everything was different. She had walked into a pageant that had been run by someone else and had only a few weeks to make any changes. She'd made the ones that meant the most to her and had to run with what was already in place for so many things. Part of her wished she hadn't done anything and let the pageant go on as if the previous owner had still been in charge.

She worried it would be a complete and utter mess. But failure wasn't an option.

"That said, your actions speak directly to your integrity. It's up to you to change that perception," Isabella said.

"I've seen some of the potential interview questions. One of them directly relates to what happened last year," Jenna said. "What if she gets that one? How do you think that will make her look?"

"That all depends on how Jessel answers it." Isabella held up her palms. "But I can't get into that with you and you know it. My best advice is to focus on being the best you can be. Don't think about the past. Ignore what anyone has to say." Isabella smiled. "There are a lot things being said about me and if I let them get to me, I'd be hiding under a rock. Just go out there and shine."

"That's hard to do when Herb only focuses on certain things." Jenna's shoulders slumped. "We also wanted to discuss potentially coming to your coaching team. We understand it wouldn't be you, but we're interested in learning more about the services your team has to offer."

"Well, I haven't opened an office yet here in Colorado Springs. That will happen in two months. I have excellent coaches. All of them are former pageant girls. I can set you up with a meeting with my assistant after the closure of this pageant to discuss your needs, but we won't get into finding a coach until you leave Herb and make a commitment to us. I don't play games." Isabella wouldn't put it past Herb to send someone over to find out exactly how she operated. He'd done it before, he'd do it again.

“Okay.” Jenna took Jessel by the arm. “We’ll be in touch and thank you for your time.”

Isabella stepped between Jenna and her daughter, catching Jessel’s gaze. “I want to be able to give you a fresh start. Learn from your mistake. You’re a beautiful young woman with so much to offer the world. Find your passion outside of the glitz and glam. Show me that. Show me what makes your heart beat a little faster. Bring it to the stage and you’ll shine bright.”

“Thank you, Miss Isabella. I appreciate it. I do have passions.” She lowered her gaze, as if embarrassed by whatever made her soul sing. “I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Come on, Jessel. We’ve taken up enough of Isabella’s time.” Jenna took her daughter’s arm and yanked her through the door just as Adrian came barreling through it, huffing and puffing.

He paused, giving them the once-over. “What on earth are you two doing here? I’ve been looking all over for you. You’re supposed to be in the conference room.”

“We’re on our way,” Jessel said, nodding once. She and her mom scurried off like scared little rabbits.

Isabella leaned back in her chair. “Well, that was fun.”

“I’m sure it was not,” Adrian said dramatically. “What the hell did they want?”

“Everything okay?” Mason leaned against the doorjamb.

“Just a little pageant drama.” Isabella rolled her neck. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“That’s not a little drama. That’s a Category 5 hurricane.” Adrian fell back on the sofa. “I honestly don’t know why you allowed them to compete. Many of the top-level pageants have been blackballing them. She’s too old to be pulling stunts like that and her mother sure as shit shouldn’t still be speaking for her. That child doesn’t have what it takes.”

“I disagree.” Isabella had seen girls like Jessel before. Whatever her passion was, her mother didn’t share it. Nor did Jenna want her daughter to express it. Isabella wanted to give

Jessel a chance to shine, without her mother's interference and without the past hanging over her head like a dark cloud. This could very well be her last chance to show everyone she wasn't the girl who cheated and she could be the best of the best. "Her mother is stifling her voice and one stupid mistake shouldn't taint everything she does. I made one or two along the way."

"You never stole someone's costume." Adrian waved his hand around as if he were batting a fly. "I think the worst thing you ever did was toss a little baby powder in someone's hair after they called you a stuck-up bitch."

"Yeah, and that was five minutes before she was supposed to go on stage," Isabella laughed. "It was a diva-bitch move, and trust me, I knew what I was doing the moment I picked up that powder."

"You did what?" Mason asked. "Over calling you that?"

Isabella shrugged. "I was eleven and the same girl put Vaseline in my shoes before I went on stage. I ended up tripping and falling. It was so embarrassing."

Mason covered his mouth.

"It wasn't funny." She glared.

"I'm sorry. But I've seen you run in those things you call shoes and I'm always terrified you're going to break your neck, but you never do. I'm not ashamed to admit I've always wanted to see you fall flat on your face in those sexy things."

"You're such a jerk sometimes." She held his gaze. Warmth filled her body, starting at her toes and inched across her skin until it coated her like a blanket.

He winked.

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach.

"You two are just disgusting." Adrian rolled his eyes. "Is this how it's going to be all week? All flirty, winky, and kissy?"

"Probably," Mason said with an amused smile. He pushed from the doorjamb and strolled toward her with way too much

swagger in his new sexy duds. He wore them as if they were a second skin. He took her hand and lifted her from the chair, heaving her to his chest. “Adrian, you might want to close your eyes,” he whispered.

The thump, thump, thump of her heart filled the center of her throat.

He traced her lower lip with his thumb before pressing his mouth firmly against hers in a wild, passionate kiss that didn't feel as though he were pretending. It was the kind of kiss that claimed a person. It was primal. Intentional. And it ended way too soon.

She blinked open her eyes, staring into his intense orbs, wondering how she'd fallen for a man who was everything she never wanted. While he possessed certain qualities she desired in a partner, he wasn't the kind of person she saw herself spending the rest of her life with. He was unrefined. He was beer, and she was champagne. They were like oil and water. They didn't mix.

And yet, when they tangled it up together, it felt like the world had righted itself.

Adrian jumped to his feet. “Are you two lovebirds done?” he asked. “We have a meet and greet to deal with and honestly, I don't want to ever see that again. I never thought I'd see you in love, but here we are and it's kind of gross.”

Mason smoothed her hair over her shoulder. “There's not one gross thing about Isabella.” He kissed her forehead. “I guess we better get rolling.”

“Oh my God. No. He's not coming.” Adrian slapped both hands against his thighs. “It's completely inappropriate.”

“I'm coming whether you like it or not.” Mason looped his arm around her waist and puffed out his chest.

This part she could do without.

She squeezed his arm. “With everything that's been happening, I've asked Mason to be at my side. His friend is head of my security team, so he's going to be working with them, since he has some experience in that field.”

Adrian tilted his head. “I get you’re rattled. But honey, no one is going to understand your boyfriend hanging around.”

“He’s also going to be my escort on the stage,” Isabella said.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” Adrian jerked his head, then planted both hands on his hips, glancing up and down. “You can dress him up all you want, but no way will he be able to walk the stage with any grace or style. Even if you had Herb work with him, I think it might be hopeless.”

Isabella wrapped both arms around Mason’s strong middle. “I don’t appreciate you talking about my boyfriend that way. Not to mention Herb isn’t half as good as I am when it comes to coaching. Not that Mason needs any. Trust me, he’ll surprise you.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Adrian mumbled. “I adore you and believe in everything you’re doing for this pageant. It’s been in need of a facelift for a long time, but this is one decision you’re making that I’m going to try to change your mind on. He should not be walking across the stage with you.”

“You know, Mason is standing right here.” Mason lifted his hand and wiggled his finger over his head. “There’s no need to speak about me as if I’m not in the room, and if Isabella wants me to be her escort, then that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Thanks, babe. You’re the best.” As she laced her fingers through Mason’s and strolled down the hallway, she did her damndest to remind her heart that this couldn’t be real. No matter what feelings were developing, the moment whoever was threatening her livelihood was apprehended, Mason would be out of her life.

CHAPTER 8



MASON RUBBED the center of his back. The older he got, the more his muscles ached. Injuries from hockey and his Air Force days reminded him he wasn't a young man anymore.

“Who’s that with Isabella?” Ryder asked.

Mason chuckled, giving his buddy an elbow to the ribs. “That’s Kennedy Sinclair of the Sinclair Foundation and a close friend of Isabella’s.”

“I thought maybe she was with the pageant somehow. She sure dresses like she fits in here,” Ryder said.

“Are you saying that’s a bad thing?” Mason set his plate of veggies and fruit on the table as the last of the contestants shuffled out of the conference room. There wasn’t a single fried piece of food anywhere to be found and his stomach growled. After spending a little time with Isabella, Mason had thought he had a good idea of what this pageant was all about, but nothing could have prepared him for the wall-to-wall stilettos and false eyelashes. He had never seen anything like it. He couldn’t decide if it was a sideshow, a circus, or something short of spectacular. “Because I thought you liked women to dress up your arm.”

Ryder tilted his head and glared. “First, half of these girls, while they might look like adults, are probably young enough to be my kid. Second, this is next-level shit. But I wasn’t sure what to make of the woman with your girlfriend.”

Mason should correct Ryder. He didn’t want to perpetuate the razzing. Not only because he had grown tired of it, but the

more everyone reminded him of the role, the more fond he became of playing it. However, with a million ears listening, it wasn't the time or place. "Here they come. I'll introduce you. Kennedy seems cool and from what I've seen, she's mad smart."

"Unless she's part of the equation for our protection detail, it's totally unnecessary."

"Too late." Mason stretched out his arm, looping it around Isabella's shoulders. He leaned in and brushed his mouth over her strawberry-tasting lips. He realized his mistake the moment Ryder cleared his throat. "Hey, babe." The affectionate term rolled off his tongue way too easily. "Kennedy, this is my best friend, Ryder."

"Ryder and Mason served in the Air Force but grew up together playing hockey." Isabella rested her hand on Mason's biceps. She leaned in close. Her acting skills were as good as her public relations and speaking ability. Not to mention the way she fielded all the questions. None of the contestants were nasty or combative, but a palpable tension in the air hadn't completely lifted. Mason wasn't sure if it had to do with the fact that Isabella made it perfectly clear that the interview would be weighed the strongest, or if the ladies competing were concerned about the things they'd heard regarding the threats against Isabella.

That meant someone in the inner circle had talked.

Mason mentally went through the list.

His team. But they weren't the leak.

Isabella and her parents. Mason didn't believe Isabella had spoken to anyone about the situation since his arrival, but that didn't mean she hadn't mentioned a few things before he showed up.

Her parents were a different story. David wouldn't, but Leah, well, she struck Mason as a gossip and a wannabe.

Adrian drove Mason batshit crazy. He was dramatic and over the top to the point Mason wanted to duct-tape his mouth

shut. Mason didn't have a good read on Adrian, so the jury was out there.

Kennedy seemed like a ride-or-die kind of chick, but Mason couldn't afford to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. However, his gut instincts told him she would never betray Isabella's trust.

Isabella trusted Leslie with work, but not her personal life. That was interesting and something that gave Mason pause. When Mason had played hockey, there were many guys on the team he didn't want to be friends with. But they had to learn to mesh—on and off the ice—in order to be cohesive and win. That meant mixing personal and work life. Even at the ripe old age of ten. There were bonding and trust exercises. Even weekend getaways where all the activities were focused on learning to trust the guy you didn't like the most.

The only people left in the room now were the four of them and two people who came with Kennedy. Mason could loosen up on acting like the overprotective boyfriend, but he chose not to, finding it impossible to curb the inappropriate thoughts running rampant through his mind.

"It's nice to meet you," Kennedy said with a bright smile. "I hate to cut this short, but my team and I are on limited time. We have some things to go over with Isabella."

"Why don't you have your meeting here." Mason pointed to the front of the room. "There are some things I need to discuss with Ryder. We'll be in the hallway if you need us." He kissed her temple. "There's nothing else on the agenda after this, right?"

"Just that thing you're making me do." Isabella rolled her eyes. "I won't be too long. We're just firming up the paperwork for the Sinclair Foundation sponsorship."

Mason watched her hips as they swung back and forth while she strolled across the room.

"Take a picture, it might last longer," Ryder whispered.

"Shut up." He turned on his heel and double-timed it out the door. "How was the meeting with Andrew and his team?"

“It went fine.” Ryder nodded. “But he’s coming here to have a chat with you. I told you he’d want to do that.”

“I got his text. But you could have told him that I have complete faith in your ability. It’s not necessary for me to go over it twice.”

“Perhaps he just wants to say hello after all these years.” Ryder lowered his chin. “Although, nothing’s changed with him. He wants to take his directive from the man in charge, and today, that’s you.”

“I fucking hate this. We’re a team. It shouldn’t matter. Every single one of us from me to you to Cruz, right down to Asher and Kent are all equals. All completely capable of running this operation. Andrew’s need for the top-down approach is a little too anal retentive, even for me. Besides, I’m sure he’s just got his panties in a wad.”

Ryder laughed. “That’s not what crawled under your skin and has you hot and bothered this afternoon.”

Mason raked a hand across the top of his head. “It’s that obvious, eh?”

“Even more so when you toss in the Canadian accent that only comes out under massive stress.” Ryder lifted one of the chairs stacked in the hallway, turned it, and straddled it. “I haven’t seen you this twisted over a woman in years. If ever.”

“It’s got to stop.” Mason leaned against the far wall so he could keep an eye on the door. “Besides it not being professional, I’ve got no room for it in my life. Relationships have never been my strong suit.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I’ve tried having a couple serious ones and they’ve never ended well.”

“We both know why and it has less to do with the fact you never pick the right girls and more to do with Mary Lou.”

Mason knew Ryder was right. His sister’s death had fundamentally changed who he’d become as a man. Losing her the way he did, watching her die in his arms, taking her last breath, asking him to tell her family how much she loved them, had taken its toll on him mentally. From that moment

on, he'd never been able to completely open up to another human. Not even his friends.

Except Ryder.

Even Cruz he struggled with, but lately that had more to do with Cruz leaving his wife. Mason didn't believe Cruz had made the right call. He supported his friend and would always be there for him, but in the end, he wished his buddy would get his head out of his ass and forgive his wife. If there was any couple that belonged together, it was them.

Mason let Ryder's words hang in the air like a storm cloud. He could argue with his friend. He could deny the truth, but what would be the point?

"It would be a huge mistake for me to act on anything. Besides, I barely know her and she and I are from opposite ends of the world. We have absolutely nothing in common. I need to learn to focus. More importantly, I need everyone on this team, including Andrew, to do their jobs."

"We are." Ryder knocked his knuckles on the back of the chair. "What you really need is to compartmentalize. It's hard because she put you in the position where in public, you're being forced to act on the emotions that are swirling around. That's conflicting."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Treat her like you would if she were family. If this assignment were me. Or someone else close. That might help. In the meantime, here comes Andrew." Ryder stood. "One thing you should know, he's not happy about taking orders from the Brotherhood Protectors. He says he respects the organization, but he doesn't like being pushed out. He feels this is his gig and resents our presence. He doesn't understand why we were hired."

"What did you tell him?" Mason shifted his gaze. Andrew was still a good thirty paces away.

"That you were Isabella's boyfriend and she wanted you and your team since the threats got personal."

"Fuck me," Mason muttered.

“I went with the narrative that’s in play.”

Mason squared his shoulders. “Hey, Andrew. Long time no see.” He stretched out his arm. “You look good for an old man.”

“You’re holding up pretty well yourself.” Andrew took his hand in a firm shake. “So, Isabella Carter.” He whistled. “She’s a catch and totally out of your league. How the hell did that happen?”

“Shortly after I retired from the Air Force, I went out to LA to visit some friends. We met at a party.” It was a story they had worked up that seemed somewhat plausible. “We got to chatting and learned we were both moving to Colorado and one thing led to another.”

“She doesn’t seem to be your type,” Andrew said. “And vice versa.”

“Stranger things have happened.” Mason shrugged. “I appreciate you working with my team on this. Isabella is a little wiggled out by the recent turn of events. I pulled some strings with my bosses to be here.”

“That’s what I was told and I’m a bit surprised, to be honest. I’ve met a few men from the Brotherhood Protectors before on different jobs, and this isn’t the kind of gig you guys usually take,” Andrew said. “And honestly, there’s no reason for you to take over or even insert yourself. My men are completely capable. I’m the best this town has to offer. No offense.”

“Actually, this is exactly what my team was hired for and we’re damn good at what we do.” Mason hadn’t meant for his words to come off sounding so aggressive, but Andrew got under his skin. “We don’t want to step on anyone’s toes. We want this to be a joint effort. However, Isabella is quite concerned, so as her boyfriend, and as an agent of the Brotherhood Protectors, I feel as though it’s my job to take charge. I’m sorry if that upset you.”

Andrew waved his hand. “No. No. It didn’t. I just want to make sure we’re on the same page. I’ve worked this pageant

for years. I know the ins and outs. You don't. While I was waiting to speak to you, I took it upon myself to call your boss, just to get a little background on what was expected. I mean, you do tend to come in hot."

"You spoke to Jake?" Oh shit. Mason hadn't briefed Jake on the status of the case in the last twenty-four hours. And he sure as shit hadn't mentioned anything about his relationship status.

"No offense. But I have had other protection agencies come in on other jobs and try to strong-arm me and my men," Andrew said. "And not to bring up the past, but you were a little underhanded back in our Air Force Academy days. I had to check."

"I understand." Mason nodded, although he didn't. This was exactly the kind of dick, chest-pounding move he expected from Andrew. Mason had never done anything to Andrew. It had been the other way around. The particular incident in question had cost Andrew a few demerits and when postgraduation assignments were handed out, Andrew got a shit detail because of it. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"Just one," Andrew said. "How is the chain of command going to work? I only want to know so there aren't any issues like there have been in the past."

Mason glanced to Ryder. "I thought this was covered in the meeting."

"It was," Ryder said. "I made it clear. Orders come from me or Cruz, through you."

"What if we see something that requires immediate action?" Andrew asked. "Again, only clarifying because I don't want to be called out for something."

Holy fuck. This was total bullshit. "You know how this works. Ryder gave you the directive. We have a game plan. If there's a problem during the pageant, we'll have comms in place. If it's before that, I trust your team is professional and will know what to do. But if I have to spell it out again, then —"

“No. No. I get it. Again, I just wanted to hear it from the man in charge,” Andrew said. “I gave Ryder my rotation schedule. I understand that one of your men will be on-site at all times.”

“That’s correct. Whoever that is, your team will answer to them.” Mason let out a long breath. “Are we going to have a problem? Because you’re the last person I thought this would be an issue with.”

“Let me ask you this.” Andrew cracked a sarcastic grin. “How would you feel if I came in and took over a detail that you’d been working for years?”

“That would depend on the situation.” Mason hated pissing contests, especially with people he knew. “If it were with family, or someone you cared deeply about, then I’d back up and let you do your thing.”

Andrew raised his hands. “Wow. I guess this is the real deal. I thought maybe it was some act, but you can’t pretend that well.” He gave a quick nod. “We’re on the same page. I’ve got a few things I need to do. You know how to reach me.” Andrew turned on his heel and marched off down the corridor, disappearing at the first right turn.

“That man has not changed one fucking bit,” Mason said. “He’s a power-hungry prick who holds a grudge for something I didn’t do, he did.”

Ryder laughed. “He holds you responsible for not being hand-selected for Special Warfare. But let’s not forget he’s always been really good at reading people. Lucky for us, you wear your emotions on your sleeve and your feelings for Isabella came out like a hungry bear.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Use them to protect her and do your job.” Ryder’s hand came firmly down on Mason’s shoulder. “Just don’t let them cloud your decision-making. That’s where they get you in trouble.”

CHAPTER 9



ISABELLA STOOD on the side of the dirt path and dug her heels into the ground. “You can’t be serious. When you said fishing, I thought you meant like going to a dock and tossing over a line or something. You never mentioned anything about wading in the water.”

“It’s called fly fishing.” Mason opened the trunk of her Range Rover and pulled out a duffel bag.

“I’m not getting near the water in these shoes. They will get ruined. Not to mention I will break my neck trying to get to the water. I might be able to navigate stairs and run in them, but I can’t do rocks.”

He laughed. “That’s why I had these delivered to the conference center this morning.” He dug into his bag and pulled out a pair of the ugliest boots known to man. They had no style, no heels, and no sparkles.

“Those are not going on my feet. Besides, my very expensive slacks will get wet, and then I’ll be cold.” She tugged her designer jacket across her body. “I’m not prepared for this at all.”

“But I am.” He winked, holding up a pair of what looked like plastic pants. “I also got you a nice jacket since it’s a little chilly and that thing won’t cut it.”

“Oh no. I have standards and those things aren’t even close.”

“I wore those ridiculous shoes all day.” He dropped the fishing attire at her feet. “We had a deal and I’m holding you

to it.”

“Come on, Mason. We only have an hour before we have to head back to my parents’ house to meet with your team. Let’s go.”

“We have ninety minutes. Plenty of time. Now put that stuff on.” He lifted his leg, tugging his waders—or whatever they were called—up his body. He snapped the suspenders over his shoulders. He took his gun holster and placed it over his chest.

“You look stupid,” she mumbled. “Do you really need that thing?”

“I don’t go anywhere without it.” He opened the rear passenger door, picked her up, and plopped her ass on the seat.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m not going to argue with you.” He knelt down and tugged at her favorite pair of ankle boots. She protested by kicking, but that only helped him in his efforts. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re a goon?”

“I’ve been called worse.” He slipped the boots on her feet. “Look, a perfect fit.”

“How did you know my size?”

“I asked Kennedy.” He laced them up. “Now, put this on over them. It will feel a little weird, but you don’t want water getting up in your boots. They might be water resistant, but water can seep in.” He took a step back, planted his hands on his hips, and waited.

She suspected that if she didn’t do what he requested, he’d forcibly put the plastic things on her himself and she wasn’t about to be manhandled again. She hated admitting that she liked this side of him. Hell, she liked everything about Mason and that confused the shit out of her because he was not the type of man she went for, ever.

Okay, maybe his personality was something she admired and valued in a partner. But everything else was all wrong.

“Fine.” She shimmied her way into the god-awful things, looping the straps over her shoulders. The last time she’d worn anything that wasn’t designer had been—never. Not even as a toddler. Her mother had caved to her every wish and Isabella had wanted grown-up fashion from the moment she could walk and talk. She’d sit and watch award shows with her mom and point at all the actresses and models, begging her mother to buy her all the sparkly things. It had been her father’s worst nightmare.

Mason adjusted the plastic pants so they fit tight before helping her into the jacket. “There.” He took a step back, sized her up and down, and smiled. “Beautiful.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“You would make a potato sack look gorgeous and don’t pretend you don’t know that.” He tucked a few pieces of hair behind her ears. “Can I suggest putting all this up in a ponytail or something? It might blow in your face.”

“Are you always this controlling?” She snagged her purse, finding a holder. “This is going to ruin my look for the rest of the day.”

He took her chin with the palm of his hand. “I’d love to see you without your lashes and all this makeup on. You’re so pretty and I know you’d be just as beautiful without it.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but it’s not the point.” Heat rose to her cheeks. Very few people had ever seen her without all the glitz and glam. It wasn’t that she believed she needed it, but it had become a part of who she was, and in her world, people expected it. To be anything other than the Queen of Pageants would cause the kind of uproar she couldn’t afford. She’d be ridiculed if anyone saw her fly fishing in this outfit. Her image would be forever tarnished. Something Mason couldn’t understand. Dressing him up only elevated his status. “I can’t be seen like this. Or without my face on. It would destroy everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve.”

“The only people who know what we’re doing are the men on my team and only because they need to know my whereabouts. I’m not asking you to go out in public without

all your glamour. I just want to see you.” He leaned closer, resting his hands on her hips. His mouth hovered over hers and she could feel his hot breath tickle her lips.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, gripping his shoulders. He threw her off-balance both physically and mentally.

“Acting on what I swore I wouldn’t.” His kiss was soft. Tender. Romantic. It sent a shock wave from her head to her toes. Caving to her desire, she deepened the kiss, swirling her tongue around his in a hot dance that spelled nothing but trouble.

He was her bodyguard. Her protector. She should push him away, but instead she pulled him closer, growing dizzy with passion. Something she hadn’t felt in a long time. The few men she’d dated in the last two years had done nothing to challenge her intellectually. Nor did the physical aspects of those relationships send her into a tailspin.

Mason broke off the kiss. He gazed into her eyes, reaching into her soul. “I’ve never met anyone like you before in my life,” he said with a raspy breath. “I shouldn’t have done that, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re quite the contradiction, Mason Quinn.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.” He tossed the bag into the vehicle and locked the doors before taking the poles leaning against the car in one hand and her hand in the other.

“Honestly, I’m not sure either.”

They walked to the river’s edge in silence. She stared off at the snow-covered mountaintops. She’d grown up in this town. Spent her childhood shopping in the city. She loved going to all the restaurants and enjoyed the nightlife. While she’d always appreciated the picturesque backdrop, she’d never stopped to truly admire her surroundings. “My God, this is breathtaking.”

“Isn’t it though.” He removed his weapon, placing it on a rock. He set up both poles. Standing behind her in a few

inches of water, he helped her cast out her line. “Jerk your wrists like this.” He held her arm, tugging gently. “That’s it, you’ve got it.”

“This is kind of dumb,” she said.

“You won’t feel that way when you’ve got a fish on the line,” he whispered in her ear. His lips pressed against her cheek.

“It’s hard to focus when you’re doing that.”

He chuckled. “Relax your hands and flick.” With great patience, he showed her the ins and outs of how to fish.

However, it took a lot of work to concentrate on anything other than Mason. His voice was strong and steady as he encouraged her to try casting on her own.

“You’re doing great,” he said, taking a few steps to the side. “You can do it by yourself.”

“I don’t know that I can.” Her hands trembled as she fiddled with the pole and line, trying to remember all the things he’d told her to do. But the only thing that came to mind was the way his body felt against hers and how his breath felt on her skin. Or how her lips begged to be kissed.

“Use your wrists. It’s just a flick as you cast out your line.” He snagged his pole and demonstrated with the ease of a professional.

Finding her footing, she cocked her arms back, and with a little too much gusto, she flung her hands forward. Her left foot slipped. She dropped her pole. Her arms flapped like a bird taking flight, but they were of no help as her body propelled backward.

“Oh shit,” Mason exclaimed, dropping his pole and lunging in her direction with his arms stretched out.

She hurled herself at him, grabbing his shoulders and jumping at his strong body.

Splat.

She landed on top of him, crashing into the water.

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her, saving her from landing in the river, but he was flat on his back, soaking wet.

“I’m so sorry.” She lifted her head. “Are you okay?”

He groaned. “I’ll live.”

Water gushed between them as the river raced through and around their bodies, filling her plastic pants. She shivered. “Holy shit. That’s cold.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He chuckled. “Think you can manage to climb off me without falling? Or hurting yourself or me?” He placed his hands on her hips and squeezed. “Perhaps we’ve done enough fishing for one day.”

“I’d say so, but now I’m all wet. What the hell are we going to do? We don’t have time to go back to my place and change.”

“I have sweats in my bag. You can wear those.”

“Over my fucking dead body.” She slipped her leg between his, doing her best to find a way to stand without rolling into the water. “I might still have something at my folks.”

He groaned, closing his eyes. “Not the right move.” He shifted her weight, easing her slightly to the side.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Again, I’ll live, but perhaps fathering children could now be completely out of the question.”

She slapped his chest as she moved to her knees, water pooling at her feet inside her waders. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“You’re not a man, so you have no opinion.” He took her hands and helped her stand. “Let’s get the waders off before we freeze to death and head back to the car.” He guided her to the bank and helped her remove the plastic pants, dumping the water out before removing his own. “Sorry about that.”

“It wasn’t your fault, although I don’t think fishing is something I’m cut out for.”

He picked up his gun, strapping it to his body. “Not true. You were just a little overzealous in your first attempt. You’ll be a pro in no time.”

“I can’t believe you think I’d ever want to do that again.” She scurried off down the path.

“Are you saying you didn’t have fun?”

“Not the point,” she said.

“It’s exactly the point. So what? We fell and got a little wet. It’s no big deal. Next time we’ll be even more prepared.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “You’re a glutton for punishment.”

Mason jumped in front of her, holding out his hand, abruptly stopping.

Peering over his shoulder on tiptoes, she gasped. Her beautiful car had been vandalized. Someone had spray-painted the words *No one wants your kind of pageant. Go back to LA* on the side. They had also smashed in all the windows.

“Stay right behind me. Do exactly as I say. Got it?”

“Yes,” she managed.

He raised his weapon, glancing around before inching closer. He crept around the vehicle, glass crunching under their boots. He grabbed his cell, tapping the screen, putting it to his ear. “Hey, Ryder, I’ve got a situation. I need our contact at the local sheriff’s office that Sparrow hooked us up with at my location immediately. And I need you here too. I’ll drop a pin.”

Silence for a few seconds followed.

“Isabella’s car was vandalized with a warning... wait. There’s also a note. Hang on.” He leaned in the front driver’s side. “It reads: *This is your last warning. Give up the pageant. If you don’t, something truly bad will happen to you.*”

She dropped her head against Mason’s back. A guttural sob lifted from the pit of her stomach. Tears filled her eyes. She understood there would be some backlash. It always

happened when she took over a pageant. When anyone did. No one liked change.

But this?

It didn't make sense.

Mason turned, wrapping his powerful arms around her, kissing her forehead. "Hurry. We're sitting ducks out here." He guided her into the brush, taking cover in the trees. "Ryder is twenty minutes out, but the police will be here in less than ten. It's going to be okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He found a log and pulled her onto his lap, gun still in his hand.

She buried her face in his neck. For the first time since she'd returned to her hometown and made the announcement regarding the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant did she truly feel as though her life might be in danger.



MASON SAT at the head of the kitchen table in David and Leah's kitchen with his team. Ryder was to his right, Cruz to his left. Asher was directly across from Mason, and Kent leaned against the counter.

The police had taken Isabella's vehicle. They had combed the area but found few clues. There were tire tracks leading to the parking area, but outside of that, Mason wasn't holding his breath.

The only thing that might give them some direction was if the culprit had left fingerprints on the note. Or if they could isolate the brand and where the spray paint had been purchased. However, that would take time, which wasn't on his side.

"Jake is sending two more men to cover the protection detail of David and Leah," Mason said.

"Who?" Kent asked.

"Logan and Nash. They're part of Darius Ford's team." Mason lifted his mug and sipped the hot coffee Isabella had made. It had a hint of cinnamon. Normally, he preferred it

black, but he had to admit, this had a calming effect on his frazzled nerves. “I need you four at the pageant now at all times. Isabella won’t back down. I’ve tried talking her into canceling, but she won’t.”

“Why not?” Asher asked. “Or at least postpone until we know who’s behind these threats. Doesn’t she understand that her life was threatened?”

“She does get that. She was completely shaken up.” Mason leaned back, raking a hand across the top of his head. “But she won’t cower to being bullied. I understand where her mindset is, especially when it’s not the first time she’s been threatened after buying a pageant.”

“But this is different,” Cruz interjected. “How are we supposed to keep her and the rest of the girls safe? Not to mention the crowd control during tomorrow’s parade.” Cruz turned his tablet, showing off his weather app. “There’s a storm system pushing into the area. Possible snow. Mind you, it’s not a lot, but this time of year, it’s more than to be expected. It could cause us some problems.”

“Sparrow is calling in some favors. So is Troy Falco with the fire department. I’ve got Isabella to agree to allow us to shorten the parade, starting it here.” Mason flipped open the map in front of him and tapped the location. “We’ll end it here instead of a mile down the street. We can make the turn here with the contestants into this parking garage where I’ve gotten permission to block it off. Just for the parade, we’ll have a few more team members from the Brotherhood Protectors. Nash, a trained sniper, will hand-select a few of the best to be on the ready on these rooftops.” He moved his finger across the paper. “I’ll be in the lead car with Isabella. Ryder will be in the final car with the Sinclair Foundation.”

“Excuse me? I’m not participating in any parade.” Ryder folded his arms and glared. “I’ll do anything but that.”

Mason held his buddy’s gaze. He didn’t waver. It was as if they were twelve all over again, waiting for the other to back down. Mason always won that battle.

Ryder blinked. “Fine, but I’m not waving like a damned fool.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to be there with Kennedy.”

“What about the rest of us?” Asher asked.

“You and Kent will walk side by side with the parade, but Asher, I’ll want you to try to get close to Andrew. Make him your friend. If you have to make me look like a dick to do it, then go for it,” Mason said. “Cruz, I’ll need you to be our headquarters. You’ll coordinate with the local police. And keep a watch over Andrew and his team. I’m struggling to trust him. He’s questioning everything we do and believes he could do it better. Having you run HQ, you can be my eyes and ears. I’ll need you to keep me abreast of everything. We’ll have a meeting first thing in the morning. Any other questions?”

“Headquarters?” Cruz arched a brow. “Are we using Isabella’s office back at the conference center for that?”

“We’ll have a meeting there before the parade with Andrew and his team. From there, you’ll go to a tent that will be set up at the garage at the end of the parade. Sparrow and her husband Stone will be there with you along with Darius. He’s bringing state-of-the-art equipment to monitor everything. But I want you there because of the possible weather issues. You’re the best man here to command an operation like this. You have the most experience at leading a large team.”

Cruz nodded, but he didn’t look thrilled by the props. Nor did Asher, who was the counterterrorism expert. Asher had already asked twice to be the one to deal with Andrew and his team. He wanted to be in charge of that aspect, believing he was the right man for the job. While Asher did have skills in understanding double agents, he’d never commanded a large team before. Cruz comprehended the dynamics and was better suited.

Asher would be better one-on-one.

“Anything else?” Mason asked.

“I think you’ve covered it all,” Ryder said.

“We’ll regroup right after the parade and make our game plan for the next event. I think we need to take this one step at a time.”

“Agreed.” Cruz stood. “I’ve got weather patterns to study and few more background checks to go over. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll walk you to your car.” Mason needed to nip in the bud this minor conflict with Cruz before it got out of hand. They were too close of friends to let this mission get in the way of that. He followed Cruz out the front door. “What’s going on with you? Why the pushback?”

“A few things.” Cruz opened the driver’s side of his vehicle and tossed his backpack onto the seat. “I’ll start with Isabella.” He lowered his chin. “What the hell are you thinking? She’s a client. Not someone to get tangled up with. You’re playing with fire. Not to mention coming in hot every chance you get. It’s not a great way to lead.”

Mason inhaled sharply. Cruz had never once been under his command. When he took his promotion, making Mason team leader, Mason still had to report to Cruz as platoon leader. The missions that Mason led were given to him by Cruz. But it wasn’t Cruz who had boots on the ground. He might have started off with them, but he wasn’t the one who completed the task. He was the one who sat with them in a small room going over the after-action report. It was Mason who had to make the tough decisions in the field when bullets came flying at him and his men.

“I’m sorry that it seems like I’m coming down hard. I have to do what I think is best for this mission. I need you by my side. I need your help and running headquarters. Having you in my ear, like you’ve been for the last five years, is what I believe is the right move. I’m a little surprised you’re questioning me on this.”

“It’s how you said it. You insulted both me and Asher.” Cruz pursed his lips. “I’m sure he feels like his skills are being underutilized and I’m feeling a little pushed to the side. Like you’re pissed at me for something. I’d like to know what.”

Fuck. Cruz wasn’t wrong. His feelings for Isabella were getting tangled up in his growing frustration over the fact that Cruz had let the best thing that ever happened to him slip through his fingers.

“I need you to manage the bigger picture, like you’ve always done and Asher on Andrew like a fly on shit.”

“Ryder filled me in on Andrew and you’re right; Asher would be the best man to pony up to Andrew.”

“I figured of all the people on this team, Asher is the only one who could play both sides with ease. He can pretend to have issues with me better than anyone. You, Ryder, and I have too much history for that, and Andrew knows it. Kent, while he’s really good at what he does, he doesn’t possess that double-agent ability like Asher has.”

“These are the things that you—as team leader—need to express up front. You could have saved some of us getting pissed off.”

“And this is why I need you in my ear running headquarters, like you have for years. You have always been able to keep me in check.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Cruz said. “But that doesn’t explain what is happening between us. I don’t like it, man. And I want to know what crawled up your ass.”

“The only thing I can say is that all of this has brought up something that you’re not going to want to hear.” Mason cocked a brow. “It’s not the time or place, but you know I’ve always believed you made a mistake by filing for divorce.” He held up his hand. “I totally get that you needed to take some time. To get your head on straight, but—”

“Drop it, Mason. That ship has sailed,” Cruz said. “And since we’re on that topic, let me give you a little advice. Stay

away from Isabella. Getting involved with her won't be good for anyone, especially you."

"Let me ask you this. Are you saying that strictly in terms of this assignment? Or as my friend?"

Cruz let out a dry laugh. "Jesus, man. Are you kidding me right now? You seriously want me to compartmentalize this shit?"

"Yes." Of all the people in Mason's life, he trusted Ryder and Cruz the most. He'd already heard from Ryder. So far, Cruz had sent a completely different message, and that conflicted Mason. He didn't need Cruz's approval. But he did want to understand where his friend was coming from. "Because as much as I've tried, I can't turn off what's been happening in my heart. I don't think you can either, even though you keep saying you're done with your wife."

"Leave her out of this," Cruz said. "As far as Isabella goes, I don't know her well enough to say one thing about her outside of this mission. I suppose if we weren't hired to protect her, I'd say if you like her, go for it. But that's not the case and I'm concerned you'd be putting Team Watchdog in a shitty situation with our new bosses if you got involved."

"That's fair." Mason leaned against the car. He stuffed his hands in his sweatpants pockets and stared at the stars in the night sky.

"Christ, you're falling hard for her." Cruz strolled around the hood of the vehicle and joined Mason. "I get that's not something that's easily ignored."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Has anything happened?"

"A few kisses, but that's it." No point in lying to Cruz, especially now that they've cleared the air, somewhat. He would keep the truth from Asher and Kent if he had to, but not Cruz. That wouldn't be cool. "It's hit me from left field and outside of using the emotion to fuel doing my job, I'm in over my head. She's everything I'm not interested in, yet I can't stop myself."

“I know that feeling all too well.” Cruz slapped him on the shoulder. “We don’t talk often about your sister, but ever since she died, you’ve held women at arm’s length. You don’t let them in. It’s as if you’re afraid you’ll end up feeling that kind of pain again if you love. I’m not one to advise on matters of the heart. I’m in the middle of a divorce.”

“You’re crazy for letting Ayla go.”

“I’m not having that conversation with you. Not now. Not ever. She and I are done. I don’t know how many times I have to say that. However, I will say I don’t regret knowing what love is. You, on the other hand, have never been in love. You’ve never allowed yourself to fall for anyone. You have your family. And you have this team. That’s it. When this mission is over and if you still have feelings for Isabella, then by all means, act on them. I just don’t think while we’re in the thick of things is the right time.”

“Mason. Cruz.” David stuck his head out the front door. “You need to come and see something that just hit the news.”

Mason pushed from the car and took off for the house with Cruz one step behind.

“What is it?” Mason asked as he rushed into the living room. His entire team had gathered around the big-screen TV. Isabella sat on the sofa, holding Leah’s hand.

“It’s not a good look for us,” Kent said as he glanced over his shoulder, then pointed to the television. “Rewind and play.”

David held up the remote and the images on the TV jumbled before he hit the play button.

“What is this?” Mason asked.

“A local tabloid show,” David said.

“Earlier today, one of our news crews spotted Isabella Carter and her new boyfriend, Mason Quinn, at a local fishing spot. Our first images catch the couple in a romantic embrace by their vehicle.”

“Fuck,” Mason muttered.

“I’m not sure we’ve ever seen Isabella wearing such attire. Can we say she rocked it? Or is this a look she should avoid? Our polls indicated that our viewers aren’t sold on the outfit.”

“God, I hate viewer polls, especially when it comes to clothing choices,” Isabella said.

“While Isabella might be graceful walking across the stage, her fishing abilities aren’t as good. Perhaps she should stick with high heels and what she does best. Smiling and waving. Watch as she takes a tumble into the water, knocking her boyfriend over.”

“They didn’t even report on the vandalism of my car,” Isabella said. “That’s the real story.”

“I’ve seen enough. Shut it off,” Mason said.

Isabella stood and glided with grace across the room. She snagged a bottle of wine and filled her glass. “That trashy show has been bashing me for years. I’m sick of it. They make me sound like a plastic doll, only good for looking pretty, never focusing on the good I do for the contestants or the community.” She turned and faced everyone in the room. “I know everyone decided it was best to squelch any news coverage of the incident with my car and the threatening letters. Mason explained why you all wanted that and I agreed, but seriously, this is just idle gossip.”

“They didn’t say anything bad,” Leah said. “It’s just pictures of you and Mason.”

“And they played into the narrative we fed them,” Cruz added.

“You don’t understand. I have a reputation to uphold and falling down while fishing doesn’t fit into the Queen of Pageants’ good image. It makes me look stupid.”

“Sweetheart, all it does is show you with a man, having a little fun,” David said.

“Daddy.” She planted one hand on her hip. “With everything that is happening and all the people who want to see me fail, it makes me look foolish.”

Mason rubbed the back of his neck. When his bosses see that, there was going to be hell to pay. He was going to need to call Jake before the night was done. But he'd deal with that after he diffused this situation. "I understand why Isabella is concerned and why she feels this could taint her reputation."

"Thank you." She smiled weakly.

"We have three options in dealing with it," Mason said. "We could ignore it and continue on as if it doesn't bother us as a couple. We could make a statement, appearing appalled by how our privacy was exploited and misrepresented. Or we could play it up."

"What do you mean by play it up?" Kent asked with a grim expression.

"I've been reading up on all the things that Isabella's pageants do for young women competing in them. I've also been studying the Sinclair Foundation and the new partnership between the two. One of the things the Sinclair Foundation does is deal with conservation. They do some work with the local fish and game in order to preserve natural resources. We could play this as a way that Isabella was learning about her new partnership and the area. It's a little weak but shows her dedication to community and understanding its needs."

"I like it," David said. "I'm a big fisherman and we've had issues with keeping areas clean. Isabella has always donated to good causes. This could be one of them."

"I'll have to think about it," Isabella said. "I don't like playing into this kind of media coverage, so I'm inclined to ignore it."

"I'm sure there will be a ton of questions to field in the morning regarding this, so you'll need to decide how you want to handle it by then," David said. "But honestly, it's not as bad as you think it is."

Isabella downed her wine in three gulps, letting it hit her belly with a thud. All she needed now was for it to move to her brain with a powerful numbing effect. She never drank like that. She always savored and sipped, only wanting the relaxing

effect. Being drunk and out of control wasn't something she normally enjoyed. "I looked like a fool."

"I know nothing about any of this stuff," Kent said. "But from an outsider looking in, you looked like someone having a good time with their boyfriend. No one can fault you for that." He turned his attention to Mason. He didn't say another word. He didn't have to.

It was Mason who needed to worry about how he came off, and everyone on his team knew it.

"It's late. We've got a busy day tomorrow," Mason said. "I'll see everyone at the conference center at eight." He said his goodbyes to his team and shuffled Isabella out to his SUV. Time to get her home. Once he had a chance, he'd make the uncomfortable call to Jake.

CHAPTER 10



ISABELLA STOOD in front of the mirror and stared at her makeup-free, lash-free face. She rarely allowed herself to be vulnerable with anyone, much less in public. Seeing the images of her in waders had been humiliating. However, the expression on her face as she tossed out the line had been one of sheer joy. She pressed her hand on the center of her chest. Her heart pounded just as it did when she'd been at the river's edge with Mason.

The experience had been exhilarating. Empowering. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced and she had no idea where to file the emotions. She couldn't decide if it was the fishing, being with Mason, or a combination of both. There was something about him that made her want to find out about his world. About all the things that brought a wide smile to his face and a twinkle to his eyes. He had a genuine calmness to his heart and an adventurous soul.

"Here goes nothing." She turned and stepped from the master bathroom and strolled through her apartment, barefooted in her silky pajama bottoms and top, not bothering to put on her heeled slippers. She made her way into the family room where Mason stood in front of the windows overlooking Colorado Springs. "Hey," she said softly. "All done with your call to your boss?"

"Yeah." He turned. His jaw dropped open and his gaze dropped to her toes before gliding up to meet her eyes. "Wow. So, that's you without the glitz and glam."

She raised her arms up. “You said you wanted to see it and since I might have gotten you in big trouble, it’s the least I can do.”

He chuckled, inching closer. “If I’m in hot water, you had nothing to do with that. It takes two to tango. I’m responsible for my own actions.”

“What did Jake have to say?”

“Nothing I didn’t deserve.” Mason stepped past her, grabbed an opened bottle of red and poured two glasses, handing her one. “He just wants to make sure my head’s in the game.”

“He’s not going to take you off my case, is he?”

“Nope.” Mason smiled. “He’s not thrilled with the media coverage, but there was no way of preventing something like that from happening. I followed protocol. I took a roundabout way of getting to the clearing. I checked to make sure I wasn’t being followed.” He sipped his wine. “We learned there was a tracking device in your Range Rover.”

She gasped, covering her mouth. “How can that be?”

“Ryder is working on that now. We swept it for bugs after we got it back from the garage, so it most likely happened at the conference center right before we left. That means whoever is doing this is close. While it could be anyone involved in the pageant, both Jake and I agree, it’s someone in your inner circle.”

“I struggle to believe that.”

“I know, but I’m leaning toward these people.” He took her hand and led her to the sofa. “The people who have the most access to you and what you’re doing are Adrian, Leslie, and Andrew.”

“Leslie would never and Andrew is a friend of yours. He’s ex-Air Force.”

“Friend is a strong word to use with Andrew. He’s got a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas. My problem with Andrew as a suspect is I don’t know his motivation. What he

has against you. I know what his problem with me is, but I can't figure out why he would want to hurt you since he's been working this pageant for many years and that wouldn't necessarily change."

"Like I said before, his contract is up after this year," Isabella said. "I haven't signed a new one. I told him we'd sit down and hammer out the details for next year. He wants a five-year contract. I don't know that I'm willing to do more than three years. And I told him I want to consider other security companies. The Brotherhood Protectors is at the top of that list." She waved her hand. "That was before I met you. My dad heard about the new secret service division and he wanted me to consider it."

"I'm honored." Mason arched a brow. "I thought you were going to give me the contracts. I don't have them."

She narrowed her stare. "You should have that paperwork. It was in with everything else that I left for you on my desk at the conference center. I even put a note on it stating that I wasn't going to review it until after the pageant."

"It wasn't there." Mason set his glass down, resting his arm over the back of the sofa. "Which means someone took it so I wouldn't see it. That could have been Andrew. Or Leslie. Or Adrian. But the question is why?"

"Or any number of people," she said, not wanting to believe that two people who had been some of her biggest supporters would ever betray her like that.

"You always lock that office, but Leslie and Adrian have keys. Outside of me and you, they're the only ones."

"This is exhausting. How do you do this day in and day out?"

"It hasn't come naturally to me," he said. "Growing up, all I wanted to do was play hockey. I had my sights on the NHL. Up until I was sixteen, all I ever heard from anyone was that I was a star. That I had what it took to go all the way. Then I went to Canada and played Juniors where I was just another hockey player. Everyone was as good as me or better. I wasn't

the star anymore. I learned real quick that I had to find something else. But the only skill I had was on the ice and that didn't require much thought. It was intuitive."

Isabella tucked her feet under her butt, inching closer. The deep timbre of his voice rolled across her ears. She could listen to him talk for hours. It didn't matter what came out of his mouth, she hung on his every word. However, she wanted to understand what made him tick. What had created this incredibly sensitive, thoughtful human being. She'd watched the way he interacted with his men, and she knew it had been a struggle for him to find the right balance between friendship and leadership. She wanted to know why.

"There had to be some strategy to your playing. Some decision-making process on the ice," she said.

"There was a game plan going in. We studied the opponent, much like we studied the enemy going into battle, but in both cases, my actions were always based in a split-second reaction to what was happening in the moment. It wasn't until the after-action report that there was any real thought given and that's where I had problems."

"What do you mean?"

He lifted his glass and swirled the red liquid, examining it as it hugged the sides before taking a sip. "I wasn't team leader until five years ago. Before that, it was Cruz. He was the one making the call on the ground. I followed his orders, making it easier not to have to think about how my decisions could affect the team. Or take someone's life. The moment I was forced into that leadership role, everything changed." He set his glass down and took her hand. "It's not because I lack confidence in my ability to get the job done. I'm damn good at what I do. But I'm better at taking orders than giving them."

"I have to ask again, why?"

He blew out a puff of air. His eyes glazed over and opened into his soul. A sadness etched across his face.

She palmed his cheek. "What happened?"

He took her hand and kissed it. “Eight years ago, my sister, Mary Lou, was killed in a car crash. I was the one driving. But the real kicker is that I begged her to let me take the steering wheel because of a snowstorm. It would have been me if I had been sitting in the passenger seat.”

“You don’t know that.” She set the wine on the table and straddled him. She held his face between her fingers, running her thumbs under his sweet, sensitive eyes. “You can’t what-if yourself with something like this.”

“Yes, I can. If she had been driving—”

Isabella covered his mouth. “You both could have died. You could have survived, but so damaged that your career could have ended. Other people could have died. You just don’t know. Besides, you did what any other brother on this planet would have done in your shoes. This is probably a horrible thing to say, but I’m sure you saw your share of death in the military.”

“I did,” he said softly.

“Was it your fault?”

“Well, no. But I do take full responsibility for my men. My job as captain of the hockey team was to lead and set an example. If we lost a game, that fell on my shoulders. My job now is to make sure that my decision-making is solid so that my men—and you—are safe. I’m not sure I did a bang-up job of that when I took you fishing today.”

“We’re not going to have that discussion again. I heard you repeat the protocol at least three times. Besides, I’m a big girl. I could have dug my heels in hard and said no.”

He cocked his head. “I pushed you, hard. I wasn’t taking no for an answer and that put you in danger.”

With tentative fingers and a racing heart, she grabbed the hem of her pajama top. She told herself she was doing this to prove a point, but if he rejected her, she’d honestly be crushed. “Are you responsible for me doing this?” She yanked it over her head, exposing her pink lacy bra. She unclasped the front hook and cupped her breasts.

His eyes grew wide. He cleared his throat, gripping her hips. His fingers dug deliciously deep into her muscles. “Um, no. But it’s a dangerous move.”

“Why?”

He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Unless *you* tell me to stop, nothing I say to myself is going to make me back down. I’m in way over my head when it comes to you. It’s made worse by the fact that two men from the Brotherhood Protectors are guarding this building, giving me a safety net to cave to my emotions.”

Her breath hitched. “You have feelings for me?”

“I wouldn’t even consider this if I didn’t.” He kissed her cheek. “If you don’t have any for me, this ends right here. While I’ve never been much of a relationship guy, I don’t play games.” He traced his finger from the bottom of her lip, down her neck, stopping in the center of her chest. “I want you and not just because you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen—with or without makeup—but because you’re the most genuinely kind person I’ve met in a long time. I’ll be honest, it doesn’t make sense. You’re not the kind of lady I’m normally attracted to.”

“I certainly don’t go for guys who fish and have poor fashion sense, and honestly, you haven’t any clue how to dress.”

He chuckled. “I feel exactly the same way you do about how opposite we are. I’m tired of analyzing it. Trying to figure out why. It’s driving me crazy.”

“So why fight it any longer?” She removed her hands, releasing the girls.

Wrapping his arms under her ass, he stood.

“Whoa, what are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed.” Holding her with one hand, he leaned over and snagged his weapon.

“With that thing?”

“And my phone. No offense, but if it rings or if I get a text, we have to stop whatever we’re doing, no matter what. Our lives could be at stake.”

“That really sucks the passion right out of me.”

“It’s our current reality.” He stumbled down the hallway with her legs tightly woven around his body, tossing her bra with ease across the kitchen as they passed. “I can promise you my mind and body will be with you, but the moment my cell goes off with any indication of danger—”

“I get it.”

He laid her on the king-size bed, ripping off his shirt. “I haven’t scared you off?”

“Unfortunately for you, all you’ve done is excited me more.”

He set his phone and weapon on the nightstand and shimmied out of his sweats.

“Boxer-briefs?” She fluffed the pillow under her head. “That’s the first correct clothing choice I’ve seen you make.”

He arched a brow. “You’re seriously going to critique my underwear decisions?”

“You bet your sweet ass I am.” She leaned up and smacked his firm butt. “Now let’s see what you’ve got under them.”

He cocked his head. “Are you always this demanding?” He snagged the bottom of her pajamas and yanked, tugging her toward the edge of the bed.

“Are you always this aggressive?” She laughed, enjoying the banter way too much. From the moment she started having sex, she always enjoyed it. It had become a physical release for her and she used it to calm her frazzled nerves. Men had come in and out of her life, fulfilling a need, but never giving her anything other than a fleeting moment of pleasure. The few relationships she’d had in the past had been more about presentation than real feelings. They represented an image she had to uphold and they never lasted long because they gave

her nothing. Even the sex fizzled shortly after she allowed the relationship to become a thing.

Lately, she felt as though there was an emptiness deep in her soul that nothing could fill. Not a man. Not sex. Not even her career that she'd poured her heart into. She wanted more, but at every turn, she only found more of the same.

Mason represented everything she thought she never wanted, and yet he was a surprise at every turn.

"I give as good as I get." He lifted her foot, kissing her ankle. "Smack me like that again, and I'll lift you over my knee."

"You wouldn't dare." Goosebumps trickled up her leg, landing in all the right places, tingling her skin.

"Try me." He winked, curling his fingers over her lacy boy shorts. "I would have guessed you to be a thong girl. Aren't you worried about panty lines or something?"

She burst out laughing.

"Why is that so funny?"

"I'm just wondering how you would know about something like that."

"I'm not sure you want me to tell you that while I'm undressing you," he said with a raspy breath.

"Oh, I want to hear this." She gripped his wrist.

"Fine," he muttered. "I knew someone once who used to constantly ask me if her panty lines were showing. It was all she could think about. Every outfit she put on, she'd ask me if her underwear was showing. If I said it was, she'd change. Drove me insane."

"How long did that relationship last?"

"About five minutes. But for the record, it wasn't because of that. She couldn't handle my deployments, and I didn't do much to ease her fears," he said. "Are we done with this conversation? Because I'd really like to get you out of this thing."

She released his hand and lifted her ass, giving him full access.

He growled.

“Your turn,” she said, biting down on her lower lip.

“In due time.” He raised her legs over his shoulders, kneeling at the edge of the bed, staring at her, licking his lips.

“Are you really going to go right for the prize, with no foreplay?”

“Absolutely not.” He smiled wickedly, kissing the inside of her knee. “I’m going to tease you so badly, you’re going to beg me to put you out of your misery.”

“I don’t beg.”

“We’ll see about that.” His tongue glided up the inside of her right thigh before kissing her navel, then back down her left leg.

She did her best not to squirm. She hated to admit to herself that she wanted him to take her hard and fast. “And here I thought you didn’t play games.”

“Not with people’s feelings, I don’t. But in the bedroom? I can be persuaded into a few.”

“You’re full of surprises, Mason Quinn.” She locked gazes with him, cupping her breasts, rolling her thumbs over her throbbing nipples.

“So are you, Isabella Carter.” He traced a finger between her legs, across her taut stomach, and up to her chest. Pressing his lips over her thumb, he pushed it away with his tongue, sucking her nipple into his glorious mouth.

She arched her back, moaning in pure delight. While her body wasn’t perfect, she took pride in the fact it was all hers. Nothing fake, except her lashes. No implants. No liposuction. No plastic surgery. She was twenty pounds heavier than when she’d been a contestant in pageants herself, but that only made her an average-size woman wearing a size six to eight dress. Having battled with an eating disorder in her youth, she wanted to put less emphasis on body type, and focus more on

poise, grace, and a woman's ability to command her own future.

In the end, that's what pageants had given her and she wanted to share that empowerment with the world.

Mason moved to her other breast, giving it the same attention. His hands massaged and teased the rest of her body. He was like no other lover she'd ever experienced. His expertise was only matched by his perception of what she desired.

And he was right on the mark.

She didn't have to guide him or tell him what she craved. He knew instinctively what fueled her passion.

No more words were spoken. None were needed. He filled her in every way imaginable. Her climax came at her quickly, shocking her as she wrapped her arms and legs tightly around his strong, protective body.

Not only did she allow her vulnerabilities to surface in his arms, but she felt something more powerful. Something no man had ever given her before. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

He pulled the covers over their bodies and held her close, kissing her temple. He was sweet. Kind. More importantly, he was real and honest.

No man had ever been as open about himself as Mason had and it humbled her in unexpected ways.

"I'm sorry, but I need to check my phone," he whispered.

"No need for apologies. I totally understand."

Holding her with one arm, he reached out with the other. "No messages. That's good. I just want to check in though. Make sure no one has any news that might be of interest."

"Wouldn't they text you if there was?"

"Probably," he said. "But Ryder and Cruz are known to get a little squirmy if they don't hear from me often. And Asher and Kent are annoyed with my decisions about the parade

tomorrow. Shooting the team a text will help ease everyone's growing concerns."

"About us?" She rested her arm and chin on his chest, fingering his tattoo. She'd always thought about getting one, but it wasn't the best look for the Queen of Pageants. She closed her eyes. How could she have been so careless? There was a box of condoms in the nightstand. Not that birth control should rest solely on her shoulders, but it wasn't like her to be so reckless. Not to mention all the other things that could happen when one had unprotected sex.

"That, among other things," he said.

"Your team doesn't like me," she whispered. She couldn't avoid the conversation, but she could put it off a bit.

"Not true." He set his cell back on the nightstand, plugging it into her charger. "We're in a new job and this kind of assignment, while it's right up our alley, is still quite different from what we're used to. Add in our distrust of Andrew and his team, and tensions are high."

"Andrew's company has been doing security for the pageant for at least six years. No one has ever complained about him, except maybe Adrian, but he's so dramatic about everything."

"We don't trust him either." Mason lifted her chin and kissed her lips. "In our game, we play the odds and they are currently dictating that Adrian and Andrew have had the most access to what could be happening. Leslie a close second."

"I disagree about Leslie. She's been with me for a decade."

"Maybe so, but people turn. Trust me, I've seen it. Let me do my job. You can dislike how I do it all you want and if I'm wrong, you can enjoy letting me know it when it's over. But until then, I'm still calling the shots."

"There has to be something wrong with me, because I really do get turned on when you get all demanding and controlling."

He chuckled. "Get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow."

“I need to talk to you about one tiny little thing before we rest.”

“All right. I’m listening.” He ran his hand up and down her arm.

“This is going to be a little uncomfortable,” she said. “I should have mentioned it sooner, but I let myself get preoccupied.”

“Your forehead is crinkled. I’ve only seen you do that a couple of times. When you’re scared or frustrated. What’s wrong?”

“I’m not taking any form of birth control. I have condoms, but I neglected to ask you to—”

“Shit,” he mumbled. “No. That’s all my fault. I even thought about it when I was carrying you to bed because I have one in my wallet. I’m so sorry.” He brushed her hair from her face. “I can’t believe I put you in that situation. It was a horrible thing for me to do.”

“You really are a unique man.” She leaned in, kissing the inside of his neck. “It takes two, so don’t go taking all the blame. It’s just that I’ve never gone without it before. I mean, even if I was taking the pill, I always made my partners wear a condom.”

“As you should and I always have.” He cupped the back of her neck, tugging her close and softly brushing his mouth across hers. “We can’t go back in time and correct our mistake.”

“But we can make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“I do like the sound of that.” He rolled her to the side, tucking her back to his chest. “However, is it okay if I panic just a little for the next few weeks?”

“I’ll be right there with you, big fella.” She closed her eyes, realizing she’d been the most relaxed she’d been in years. Normally, she’d be telling whoever she’d just had sex with to leave her bed. That she needed her space in the morning for whatever the next day had in store.

But not with Mason. Even with the concern of going without protection, she felt at utter ease in his arms.

Something about him made her want to see what a real relationship was all about, only she wasn't sure he would want to do the same.



MASON FELT THE BED SHIFT. He blinked open his eyes, and with quick reflexes, he grabbed Isabella's wrist. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To shower and put on my face before you see how ugly I am." She tugged her arm free, scurrying toward the bathroom.

He chuckled as he reached for his cell. There were two messages from Cruz. One from Asher. One from Kent and a message from Ryder.

He scanned through the texts. All updates regarding background checks and the plan for the parade.

Nothing that needed a response from him immediately.

He hit play on the message from Ryder.

"Hey, lover boy," Ryder's voice echoed across the air.

Mason rolled his eyes.

"Hope you had a nice evening up there in the penthouse while the rest of us peons had to suffer in lesser accommodations. Anyway, I thought you might want to know that while I reviewed all the paperwork for the pageant's ownership transfer from Helen to Isabella, I discovered Adrian didn't pass on buying the pageant. Helen refused to sell it to him. He made three different offers, but she turned him down flat. I'm meeting with her at seven. I should still be able to make it to the conference center by eight, though I could be a few minutes late. Hope you had a *comfortable* night."

"Fucker," Mason muttered. He swung his legs to the side of the bed. He didn't know what to make of the Adrian situation. Hell, all his suspects' motivations were weak at best. But if Adrian had wanted the pageant for himself, and he'd

been refused on multiple occasions, Mason could see why he'd want Isabella out of the picture.

Adrian had repeatedly stated he adored Isabella and her mission, but that didn't mean he believed it. Isabella hired him to help with the transfer, using him to run things until she could return to Colorado Springs. He had more access to everything than anyone else, including Leslie.

Andrew was the only other person with that kind of means of entry, making Mason incredibly nervous.

Mason quickly texted his thoughts on the subject to Ryder before setting his phone on the nightstand and making his way into the bathroom. He stared at Isabella standing naked in the shower as it filled up with steam.

He shouldn't step in, but he couldn't help himself. He had absolutely no self-control when it came to her and he honestly didn't see himself gaining any. Being with her was as smooth as peanut butter. Their differences didn't seem to matter. He no longer cared that she had no experience in fishing, camping, or any of his passions. She'd given it a try. Her smile showed him that she'd at least enjoyed herself for the few stolen moments.

"Oh, hello." She brushed her wet hair from her face and smiled. "And here I thought you'd give a girl a little space to get all pretty."

"You look gorgeous just the way you are." He snagged the funny cleaning thing that dangled from a handle and lathered it, telling himself he could clean her body and leave it at that, knowing full well he'd want to ravish every inch of her silky, sweet skin.

"You're going to laugh, but I've never taken a shower with a man before."

"There's a first time for everything." He ran the sudsy water across her shoulders, down the center of her chest, stopping at the swell of her breasts. Leaning over, he sucked her hard nipple into his mouth.

She clutched his head, digging her sharp fingernails into his scalp. She arched her back, moaning sweetly. Her breath

came in raspy pants as he glided his hand between her legs, massaging gently.

“You’re irresistible,” he whispered.

“That’s exactly what a woman wants to hear when a man is doing... doing... that.”

He kissed a path down her stomach, then lifted her leg over his shoulder, lapping at her softly. She tasted like sunshine drenched in the sweetest nectar. He couldn’t get enough. All he wanted was to give her as much pleasure as he possibly could. To satisfy her in every way.

Her fingers threaded through his hair and soft moans filled his ears like the ocean crashing into the shore.

“Oh, yes, Mason,” she said as the hot water from the shower beaded down his back. “Please. Yes. Oh, God.” Her muscles tensed and her stomach quivered. She cupped his face and he rose. She kissed him, hard, wiggling against his body.

“Babe, the condoms are in the bedroom,” he managed to ground out.

“I want you now.” She curled her fingers around his length, guiding him closer. “What difference does it make? We already made the mistake.”

It was hard to argue with her logic, even though he knew deep down that it did matter. But his resolve had already disappeared. With more aggression than he intended, he turned her, pressing her against the wall and spreading her legs. He slammed inside her over and over again. It wasn’t romantic. It wasn’t anything other than pure desire. Two people desperate to fill each other.

A second climax spilled from her body as she called out his name.

His orgasm collided with hers like a tidal wave crashing violently into land, wild and out of control. He was lost in her and it wasn’t solely physical. Everything about her spoke to him in ways no woman ever had. She was like a lighthouse in the dark night, guiding him home. She was everything his

sister had always told him was out there, waiting for him, if he'd only open his eyes, and his heart.

She dropped her head back, resting it on his shoulder, letting out a long breath while the warm water trickled over their pleasure-soaked bodies. "That might last me until tonight."

"You're a little vixen."

"I like sex, what can I say. But I like it a hundred times better with you," she whispered. "You're quite amazing."

"Now I'm blushing." He pressed his lips on her neck before reaching for the nozzle and shutting off the water. "Although I can be a jealous man."

She turned, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "If I catch you looking at another woman, there will be hell to pay."

"Oh my. Well, right now, there's only one lady I have eyes for." His heart fluttered into his stomach like a fish out of water. A million things raced through his brain, but only one stuck.

He more than liked Isabella, he was falling for her—and falling hard. Harder than he'd ever cared for anyone in his life. There'd been a few women over the years he'd really enjoyed. However, no one had reached in and touched his heart quite like Isabella.

"Good." She pushed open the shower door and snagged a large terry cloth towel, wrapping it around her body.

He stood in awe as she put a gray thing around her hair. "It will take me about fifty minutes to get ready. Can't have the Queen of Pageants looking like common folk."

He took a towel and dropped it around his waist. He stepped in front of her, yanking the funky thing from her head, letting her wet hair dangle around her shoulders. Cupping her chin, he gazed deep into her soulful eyes. "With or without all the makeup and false eyelashes, you are the most gorgeous creature I've ever laid eyes on."

“You’re not so bad yourself.” She ruffled his hair. “But I want to try something with this mop of yours.”

He narrowed his stare. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Just a little gel. You’ve got thick waves to your hair, but it needs some taming.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Aw, come on. Please.” She pursed her lips. “Let me do it. If you hate it, you can wet it down and style it however you want to, but you’re wearing the outfit I picked out for you. That, you don’t have a choice in. Not since the whole world believes you’re my boyfriend.” She raised up on tiptoe and kissed his lips. “Not that I’m expecting anything. Nor am I looking for something, but we have had sex. Twice. And...” She dropped her head to his shoulder. “You’re a complication that I’m not prepared for.”

“Tell me about it.” He let out a long breath. “I don’t know what to make of any of this. Perhaps now is not the time to analyze it.”

“All right.” She glanced up. “Go put on the outfit marked parade. Then I’ll fix your hair.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mason had no desire to argue with Isabella. It had less to do with the fact she could be exhausting when he tried, and more because he didn’t want to. He honestly enjoyed the new clothes. They fit his body well, and he looked damn good in them. More importantly, he enjoyed the way Isabella smiled triumphantly when he put them on. He didn’t feel as though he was changing who he was but expanding a part of his personality that had already been there.

He found the dark slacks, matching suit, and of all things, the pink shirt, which she had described as *salmon*.

To him, it still looked pink.

As quickly as possible, he dressed.

Stepping back into the bathroom, he leaned against the counter, watching her apply something to her face with the quick stroke of a brush. She wore a pair of yellow lacy boy

shorts and a matching bra. Her hair had been dried and was currently in big rollers.

He bit back a smile.

“This is a first,” she said, pausing to stare back at him in the mirror.

“What is?”

“A man seeing me like this.” She waved a hand over her head. “Last night was a first in at least five years.”

He coughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t allow men to spend the night. I don’t stay over either.”

“Ever?” He arched a brow. “What about when you’re in a relationship?”

She went back to applying her makeup. “The last few I’ve been in weren’t worth it to me.”

“I find that sad.”

“I suppose it is,” she said. “I thought I was in love once. Maybe I was. But he turned out to be a total jerk. Since then, most of the guys I’ve dated have been about as superficial as my lashes.” She picked up the fake things and waved them in his direction. “You might think I’m a bit of a bitch, but I used them for sex as much as they used me.”

“I don’t think that’s bitchy.”

She took him by the arm and shoved him in front of the mirror. Reaching in front of him, she lifted a bottle and squirted something into her palms, rubbing them together. She ran her fingers through his hair, shaping and pushing the strands until she was satisfied about their placement. She patted his shoulder. “It’s a subtle change, but what do you think?”

“It’s not horrible.” He turned his head to one side, then the other. “So, why didn’t you kick me out of your bed last night and tell me to sleep on the sofa or in the guest room?”

Gently, she pushed him out of the way so she could go about beautifying her already adorable face. “I thought we weren’t going to try to figure this out.”

He glanced at his watch. “Since this is going to take a few more minutes, we might as well at least talk about this part of it.”

“It’s going to sound silly, but I had a lot of fun fishing. Something I thought I’d honestly hate. Even though I’m not thrilled with how stupid I looked in that outfit, I saw the enjoyment on my face. I can’t deny—no matter how much I’m trying to—that you make me want to try new things. To be different. To see myself in a different light. Much like I expect the world to see pageants differently.” She smiled. “And I really like you. You’re not like anyone I’ve met before. The models that I’ve dated are arrogant and cocky, and you can be that way, but they’re often as fake on the inside as they are on the outside. You’re not.”

“That was a lot of words to get out that you like me.” He winked.

She laughed.

“Can I ask you a weird, potentially awkward personal question?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Why aren’t you on birth control?”

She lifted one of her lashes and applied some goop to it before leaning closer to the mirror. “I had my IUD removed when I left LA. I just haven’t had the time to get a prescription for the pill. I wasn’t seeing anyone, so I wasn’t in a hurry.” She blinked a few times before moving to the other eye.

“Do you want to get married? Have children?”

“At one time I did.” She shifted, leaning her hip against the sink. “I haven’t given it much thought over the last few years. What about you?”

“My career has always gotten in the way. Before my sister died, she told me I used it as an excuse. That and my inability

to date anyone who was worth marrying. According to her, and all my friends, I only date girls who can be seen as another buddy.”

She patted his cheek. “Well, that, my sexy bodyguard, I am not.”

“True.” He held her gaze for a long moment. “Would you go out on a proper date if I asked?”

“I think I probably would,” she said. “Now, go make me some coffee. If I don’t get some caffeine in me soon, you won’t like me.”

“Doubtful.” He took one step, then quickly turned. “Um, this is incredibly premature and totally out of left field, but what if you’re... you know... should you be drinking coffee?”

Her big beautiful eyes grew wide with shock. “And what if I was? What would that mean? What would we do?”

“I have no fucking clue.” His heart dropped to his toes. Visions of things he’d never even thought about danced around in his head like a movie.

A home.

A picket fence.

A wife.

A family vehicle.

And kids.

He’d lost his ever-loving-mind.

“I just know that what should be scaring the shit out of me, isn’t.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

“I’m freaking you out, eh?”

“No,” she said. “I’m feeling the same way, and that alone is utterly terrifying.”

CHAPTER 11



MASON STOOD in front of the lead car, adjusting his earpiece. He'd wanted to cancel the parade. Between the snow that sprinkled from the sky and the new information they'd learned about Adrian, he had a bad feeling settling in the center of his chest.

"You look like someone kicked your dog." Ryder leaned against the hood of the vehicle. "What's going on?"

"Something's not right." He tapped his chest. "I can feel it deep in my soul. It's that same sensation I got on Operation Bosworth."

"That was a fucked-up situation."

"And two good men died." Mason lifted his hand to rake his fingers through his hair, but then he remembered the gel. He dropped his arm to his side. "Between your meeting with Helen this morning, and Andrew's shitty attitude about the extra manpower, my heartburn is at an all-time high."

"What did Isabella have to say about the information Helen told me?"

"She was honestly shocked. She had no idea Adrian tried to buy the pageant. He's been telling her all along he wanted nothing to do with it. That he was tired of being a part of it and was thrilled that she finally agreed to take it over, making all the same changes he wanted."

"Only, every time Helen wanted to weigh the scores differently, he pushed her into keeping things the same, telling her how contestants would leave. And he'd been partially

right. Girls threatened not to sign up, only Helen now believes that was all his doing,” Ryder said. “She thinks it was his way of pushing her to sell it to him. He didn’t know she’d been chatting with Isabella for two years.”

“So, if he’s behind this, he only stayed on to help sabotage in hopes of having the pageant fall into his hands, saving the day after Isabella ruined it.” Needing to do something with his hands, Mason rubbed the back of his neck. “Only, he couldn’t have done it all by himself.”

“Andrew’s a lot of things, but I’m struggling with him being that much of a dick.” Ryder glanced over his shoulder. “But I did some digging, and Andrew’s company is in financial trouble. Adrian has deep pockets. And I mean deep. He’s worth millions. Desperate people do stupid shit.”

“No truer words than that, but we both know Andrew is capable of some underhanded shit.” Mason glanced toward the sky. “Jesus, man. I can’t let this parade go on as is. Too many things could go wrong, especially if Andrew is helping Adrian, which we have no idea if that’s a fact. If anything happened to Isabella, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Let’s talk about that for a second, compartmentalizing Isabella and your feelings separately from the unknowns with Andrew.” Ryder shifted, catching his gaze. “No bullshit. No razzing about the pink shirt.”

“It’s salmon.” This is where Ryder became Mason’s ride or die. Before every mission when Mason had been team leader, they took the time to go over the directive, all the worst-case scenarios, alone. Without the rest of the team. It wasn’t that Mason didn’t trust his men. He did. They were the best. But they didn’t understand Mason’s struggles and he didn’t need his men concerned about his ability to lead. If Ryder had been taken out of the equation, Mason would be left with no choice but to make the tough calls.

And he’d do it. It was his job. However, the tickle in his brain constantly questioning his judgment would always be there. This conversation would navigate Mason through his

emotions. It would show him what was being driven by the past, and what was in play in the present.

“Whatever.” Ryder rolled his eyes. “Where exactly is your head at regarding Isabella? And it’s just me here. You’re not team leader right now. We’re just two old hockey buddies shooting the shit.”

“Fuck, Ryder. This is nuts. I mean, like next-level crazy. I care about her too much and let things go too far.” Mason would never dare tell anyone else on his team about what had happened, not even Cruz. There were things that had fundamentally changed his friendship with Cruz over the last two years. It had been difficult for Mason to talk to Cruz about it in part because what Cruz did with his life was none of Mason’s business.

Even if Mason knew Cruz had made the biggest mistake of his life.

“So, you slept with her.”

“Now that just sounds crass,” Mason mumbled. “It wasn’t like that. She wasn’t someone I took to bed and had a little fun with. It was fucking mind-blowing.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Ryder lowered his chin. “It was a statement of fact, not a judgment or anything else. And seriously? You’ve never described a woman like that before. It’s always been a shrug of a shoulder and a *She’s okay. We had a good time.*”

“It was like I was tossed into some alternate universe. It makes no sense,” Mason said. “She’s everything I’m not interested in. On the outside she’s like this made-up doll. Or some glamorous movie star that you admire from afar but make the assumption that it’s all for show. But all that glitzy stuff is really part of who she is and for fuck’s sake, I like it. Even worse, the woman has depth. And all the work she does for the community? The places these girls end up going? It’s damn impressive.”

“You don’t have to sell me on her track record,” Ryder said. “But it is hard to get past the Barbie doll look. I mean, I

can't picture her going camping. And the fishing, well, I saw what happened there."

"She actually had fun and is looking forward to giving it another try." Mason smiled, but his stomach quickly filled with the uncertainty of the morning's events and what that could mean. There had been no talk of a morning-after pill. No discussion about an abortion. Where they ended the conversation should make him want to run, but it only served to make him want to plant his feet firmly on the ground and find out what true love was all about.

Now that he had a little time and space, he was totally freaked out by the prospect of Isabella being pregnant. "There's more, though." Mason closed his eyes. "I really screwed up."

"Taking her to bed isn't a fuckup. Do you know how many men I've met so far on the Brotherhood Protectors that have fallen for the very—"

"It's not just that," he whispered, blinking open his eyes. "It's almost funny, but it's not. I'm supposed to protect her, and yet I couldn't even manage to reach for the protection. I've never done that before. Ever."

"Well, now I know what's really bugging you and man, while I understand why that has you, of all people, tied up in knots, you have to get it out of your head. And fast."

He couldn't. It had bubbled up from the dark recesses of his heart and landed right in the middle of his brain. "Mary Lou was two months pregnant," Mason said with a thick emotion lodged in his throat. "She hadn't even told our parents. I only knew because she told me when I landed that night. She'd been so happy. Her husband was thrilled, but it all came crashing to a halt because of—"

"If you say it was your fault, I'll deck you right here." Ryder folded his arms across his chest. He'd heard this story a million times. He'd always been patient and let Mason get it out, but not today.

“What’s tossing me off my game is that I’m not scared of the consequences of my actions. Not one fucking bit. I’m only afraid I won’t be able to keep history from repeating itself.”

“It’s apples and oranges, man. Situations are different and you know it. You’re making all the right calls.” Ryder slapped him on the back. “Look. We’ve got two full teams from the Brotherhood Protectors. Ours and Darius’. Plus, we’ve got Sparrow and her husband Stone, Troy Falco, and two of his brothers, Trent and Heath. They’ve all been read in and know about Adrian and the possible Andrew connection.”

Mason sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The one thing I’m questioning is letting Andrew and his team continue to work this event as if we’re not looking at him as a suspect. I feel like I’m putting Isabella and every single girl in these vehicles in danger. I might have everyone’s support and no one has questioned my decision. Not even Jake, yet I can’t help but think this could go to shit real quick.”

“The cars have been checked. The streets have been double-checked. Trust that you’ve done everything right and let us have your back. We can handle anything that comes our way.”

“There are too many unknowns and don’t look at me like you haven’t worried about all the things that could go wrong,” Mason said.

“Okay. I’ve thought about it. But you’ve tried getting her to change her mind. You’ve even gone to Jake, asking him if you can make her and he’s all but said she’s the client.”

Mason tapped his ear as Cruz’s voice boomed through the comms with a round of testing. “Mason here,” he said. “We’re a go. Guess you better go find your date. Kennedy’s a real looker. She’s close with Isabella. I could set you up and we could go on a double date just like we used to back in high school.”

“Not going to happen. She’s not my type.”

Mason laughed. “Stranger things have happened.”



“HOW DO YOU STAND THIS?” Mason sat on the back of the convertible with a possessive arm around Isabella as she smiled and waved to the crowd. There was very little chatter in his ear, making him even more nervous. The vehicle approached the halfway mark. Nash, a sniper with the Brotherhood Protectors, had positioned himself at the top of the building to his right.

With his hands clasped in front of his body, Andrew stood at the ready to Mason’s left.

“I’ll be honest, this isn’t my favorite part, but this pageant has had a parade for a hundred years. I’m not going to change something that is so ingrained in the history of the community. It has more to do with Colorado Springs than with the pageant itself.” She glanced in his direction. “Aw, come on, you can smile better than that.” She leaned in and brushed her lips over his mouth.

The crowd went wild.

He squeezed her leg. “Babe, not the time or place. I’ve got a job to do.”

“You realize that this side of you turns me on, right?”

He laughed.

“There’s that smile.”

“There’s a man with a knapsack following the lead car,” Andrew’s voice crackled. “He’s wearing a dark knitted cap, a dark parka, and jeans. Very nondescript. He’s on the right side of the road, about twenty paces before Isabella’s car. I’ve been watching him for five minutes now.”

Mason shifted his gaze. “Sorry, I need to focus on something.” He pressed his finger against his ear while he scanned the crowd, finding the man in question. He strolled down the sidewalk, weaving through people, keeping his head down, clutching his bag. His coat hung partially open, and Mason thought he could see a weapon.

Shit.

“Possible gun,” he whispered. “We’re not far from the turn. Logan, can you cut him off? He should—”

“One of my men is closer,” Andrew’s voice bellowed in Mason’s ear. “Hall is in front of the coffee shop.”

This is where things got dicey. Everyone was on the same channel and it required Mason to speak in code, which wasn’t easy. “Hall is on the other side of the street. Logan, make your move, now.”

“Hall can get there faster,” Andrew said with a cold bite. “I’ve got two other—”

“I want Logan there. Now, let’s keep this channel clear.” Mason shifted his gaze back and forth from the intersection where Logan would come from and the man in question.

Isabella scooted closer. “Is everything okay?” she whispered.

“I don’t think so.” The decision to be honest had nothing to do with his feelings, and he knew that deep in his soul. If this were any other protection detail, he’d want the client to be prepared. “I need you to be ready to do as you’re told.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Just keep smiling and waving. My men are on it. Everyone is aware. I’m not going to let anything happen to... fuck.”

The suspect took off running the moment he spotted Logan. He ran right in front of the lead car.

Mason grabbed Isabella and pushed her down into the back seat, covering her body. He pulled out his weapon and peered over the top of the windshield, ignoring the muffled protests coming from Isabella.

The crowd reacted with gasps. Some people crouched down. Others backed up. And even others took off running.

“Someone calm the crowd, please,” Mason said.

The man with the backpack raced off toward the parking garage.

“I’m on him,” Logan said into the comms.

“Right behind you,” Troy said.

“We should take the cars to the second location,” Andrew said. “There could be someone else near the parking garage. This could have been our perp’s plan all along.”

Doubtful. “No. We’re close to the turn,” Mason said.

“Coming from the north,” Stone said. “I see him. We can corner him.”

Commotion came over the comms. Muffled voices. A few cuss words.

“We got him,” Logan said.

“Thanks, everyone.” Mason held Isabella low in the vehicle. A clip had fallen out and her big locks were discombobulated in ways he had no idea what to do with, even though he’d helped her pin it in place. “We’ll regroup in the garage. Andrew, I want you at that meeting. Have your men continue to work crowd control, but I want them all accounted for when I meet with you.” Mason couldn’t afford for Andrew to leave the area, if he was indeed involved. “Get us in the garage, now,” he said to the driver before leaning over and kissing her temple.

“I should wave one last time to the fans.”

“Over my dead body am I allowing that.” He kept her head pressed firmly in his lap, his weapon at the ready with his free hand. He made sure she remained low. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched as the rest of his team flanked the car. Everyone except Ryder, who raced with Kennedy, dodging between the other vehicles until he reached Mason. If something like this happened, Ryder was to have texted Darius, giving his team the order to follow—to their best of their ability—every single man on Andrew’s payroll. It was a tall order, but Darius had a good crew. With Nash on one of the rooftops, Mason felt comfortable that it wasn’t impossible. They had worked tirelessly through the night to ensure trackers had been placed on every vehicle. “I honestly don’t know if we’re dealing with one man or if there are more.”

Ryder quickly opened the front passenger door, tucking Kennedy inside. “Keep your head low until we’re inside the garage or Mason gives the all clear,” he said. “We’re all set.” He nodded. “I’ll see you inside.”

Kennedy crouched down, looking over the seat with wide eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but my hair is not,” Isabella said as the car made the turn.

The garage was twenty feet away. Mason could see two men from the Brotherhood Protectors standing at the barricade. They removed the horses, allowing the vehicles to pass.

“Get the contestants into the bus and get them back to the conference center. Ask Troy, his brothers, and Asher and Kent to go with them. They can take one of the SUVs. Everyone else stays here for a debrief.” He glanced over his shoulder, looking for anyone from Andrew’s team. “Only them. No one else. Do I make myself clear?”

Both men nodded.

“The suspect was carrying a weapon,” Logan said over the comms. “Suspect has a concealed weapons permit. His name is Jeff Henderson. He had a camera in his bag and he’s bitching he was only there to take pictures. Sparrow and the local sheriff are cuffing him to take him in for questioning. Need anyone to go?”

“Sparrow can handle that,” Mason said with more authority rolling off his tongue than he’d been used to. His confidence in giving orders had grown by leaps and bounds. He wasn’t sure where it came from. Perhaps the adrenaline rush. Or maybe it was the woman currently clutching his thigh.

“You got it,” Sparrow said. “I’ll report back as soon as I know more.”

“Thanks, Sparrow.” Mason sighed in relief as the vehicle rolled to a stop in front of their makeshift headquarters. “All right, ladies, we’re safe for now.”

Isabella lifted her head. Her bright eyes were filled with a questioning glare. “Were we really in that much danger?”

“The man had a gun, so I’d say yes.” He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m sorry about your hair.” Without thinking about his surroundings, he gently kissed her sweet lips.

The sound of someone clearing their throat caught his attention. He turned his head.

Cruz stood at the front of the tent that had been set up, his hands planted on his hips and a big old frown on his face.

The rest of the cars parked and the girls shuffled from them, scurrying off to the transport vehicles as directed by Darius and the other members of his team.

Cruz strolled to the passenger side, helping Kennedy out, while Mason guided Isabella. “I want you to stay here with me.”

“I have no intention of leaving your side.” She patted the center of his chest.

He leaned over and lifted a few of the clip thingies that had fallen out of her hair from the back seat. “Do you want me to try to put it all back? I might remember how it all went.”

“Seriously?” Cruz asked. “You’re worried about her hair right now?”

“It’s fine but thank you.” She took them from his hand. “I know you have some things to deal with. Can I go sit down inside the tent?”

“Of course. But don’t go anywhere else. Kennedy can go with you.” He watched as she looped her arm through Kennedy’s and gracefully disappeared into the tent.

“What the fuck was that—”

“Drop it, Cruz.” Mason had no right to be angry with one of his best friends. Only he was, but for all the wrong reasons. They’d just had this conversation. However, he’d never told Cruz the real reason why it bothered him so much.

And that's where his anger stemmed from in this very moment.

"Look. I don't care if you've got something going with her or not," Cruz said. "But right now isn't the time to be showing affection."

"Actually, Cruz. It's exactly the time." Mason puffed out his chest. "She's terrified. All I did was show her a little compassion."

Ryder inched closer. He didn't say a word, but his presence helped calm Mason's blood pressure.

"It was more than that," Cruz said.

Mason was ready to fire back when his cell phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen. "It's Sparrow. I'll put it on speaker." He tapped the screen. "What's going on?"

"I've got some interesting news about our perp," Sparrow said.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Mason said.

"Am I free to speak?"

Mason scanned the area. "It's just us, for now."

"Well, Jeff has no priors. Doesn't even have a fucking parking ticket. At first glance, he looks like a model citizen. Actually, he is. He's also former military. He served with Andrew on two missions."

"Fuck. I knew it." Mason exchanged glances with Cruz and Ryder. "Think you can get him to roll over on Andrew?"

"Oh, I'm working on it," Sparrow said. "I'll call you soon." The phone went silent.

"What do you want to do now?" Cruz's expression had softened some.

Mason needed to have a conversation with Cruz in private, although he'd leave his soon-to-be ex-wife out of it and his dead sister. Mason's emotions regarding the two had nothing to do with the problem at hand. Bringing it up wouldn't be fair to Cruz. It was none of Mason's business and who was he to

judge. His good buddy had been through the wringer. He understood the pain and knew it hadn't been an easy decision for Cruz to leave. It had eaten him up.

The only problem was Cruz still loved Ayla, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

"I want to isolate Andrew's team," Mason said.

"That's going to piss him off." Ryder jerked his head toward the entrance, where Andrew marched his way in their direction.

"Good." Mason nodded.

"Don't you think it would be better to have him believe we're a team?" Cruz asked. "Playing nice with the enemy, gaining their trust is one way to trip them up."

"While you make a valid point, I know Andrew," Mason said. "He's already pissed and if we buddy up to him now, he's going to think something's up. I want him to continue acting as he is and allow him to believe he has a chance at whatever his game plan is. Besides, we still don't know exactly how he and Adrian are connected. Alienating him makes him believe he's got a chance, especially when I'm bringing him closer to the prize."

"Mason's right." Ryder nodded. "At the Air Force, he liked being in charge. He was that guy who got off on power. Strip him of that, and he'll play dirty. He had problems with Mason back then. He hated that Mason was smarter and always got the attention of our superiors."

"It was a constant pissing match when it came to him," Mason added. "Let's let him hang himself."

Cruz narrowed his stare. "How does Isabella feel about being bait?"

Mason ran a hand across his face. "We need Andrew and Adrian in the same space with us and her before tomorrow. I want this over today and the only way to do that is to use her and she knows it. She doesn't like it any more than I do." Mason shifted. "Let's do this."

Andrew jogged the last twenty paces. His face hardened and he glared, holding Mason's stare. "What the fuck was that out there? You could have really put Isabella in danger. You should have let my man take the suspect down. He was closer."

Let the games begin. "Your man was across the street, whereas Logan was on the same side," Mason said. "But I'm not going to stand here and argue with you. I need you to collect all your men once the crowd has been cleared." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Once that is done, I want all of you in the conference room for a debrief."

"I've told a couple of them they could go home to their families right—"

"Tell them I won't take up too much of their time," Mason said. "I'm sure they'll understand considering what just happened. Now, please go deal with that."

Andrew's lips drew into a hard line. However, he nodded, turned on his heel, and left.

"Cruz, your job is to make sure he does what I asked." Mason took out his cell and sent a text to everyone on this mission who was either employed by the Brotherhood Protectors or with Sparrow to change their comms. He needed to make sure Andrew was off the frequency. "Ryder, check in with Darius. I want an update on what he and his men saw."

"Sure thing." Ryder dug his hand in his pocket and glanced at his phone. "See you back at the conference center."

"Cruz, I need a word." Mason let out a long breath. "I'm sorry I once again came in hot."

"No need to apologize for doing your job. I take no issue with that. Or even your tone. Just the way you're dealing with Isabella and whatever is going on with the two of you. There's a time and place to show emotion; this isn't the one of them."

"When was the last time you saw me with a woman? In a real relationship?"

Cruz cracked a smile. "You mean one that had a chance of lasting? Maybe never."

“Well, this one might actually have a fighting chance, so I need you to cut me some slack.” He held up his hand. “I know my timing sucks and I might have made a questionable move in kissing her when we rolled in here, but this isn’t a fleeting fling. Or at least I hope it isn’t.”

“Jesus. It’s that serious? Already? It’s only been a week.”

And yet to Mason, he felt as though he’d known Isabella his entire life.

“I’ll be damned. You always did wear your emotions on your sleeve,” Cruz said. “But here I thought it was your unease about being team leader in a new environment, which you’ve obviously overcome.”

“It’s a lot of things,” Mason said. “But I need you in my ear and that means staying in HQ and helping me deal with Andrew. Can you do that for me?”

Cruz squeezed his shoulder. “Of course. I’ll run command. I’ll stay behind until I know Andrew has done what he’s supposed to, and then I’ll catch up. You know how to reach me.” He smiled. “If you really care about her, then I hope it works out because I, of all people, know how shitty it is when it doesn’t.”

There was no way Mason was going to let Isabella walk out of his life without putting up a damn good fight. Even if it meant wearing stupid shoes and hair gel.

CHAPTER 12



“OH MY GOD, ISABELLA.” Adrian charged forward with his arms open wide. “Are you okay? I was way in the back, but it was sheer chaos.”

Isabella inwardly cringed. She squeezed Mason’s hand before releasing it and embracing Adrian.

If everything Mason had told her about Adrian had been confirmed, he’d betrayed her trust in the worst way.

But so had Helen, and her excuse for not telling her about Adrian’s proposal to buy the pageant had been lame at best. Helen should have given her the heads-up. Instead, Helen figured that Adrian would walk away because he hadn’t been given what he wanted.

Helen’s contract with him had been for five years. He technically had two more, and Isabella had been willing to honor it.

The lies and manipulations had run rampant, potentially putting her life on the line.

“Thanks to my awesome boyfriend, I’m fine.” She turned her head, smiling weakly at Mason.

“Adrian, if you don’t mind, I’d like to speak with you.” He waved his hand toward the other side of the conference room.

“About what?”

“It will just take a minute,” Mason said. “Babe, will you be okay for a bit?”

“I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Mason glanced around. “All right. But don’t be gone too long and take someone with you. Safety in numbers.”

“I’ll bring Kennedy. She could drop-kick you to the ground without batting an eyelash.”

“Huh?”

Isabella smiled. “I’ll explain later.” She waved frantically to Kennedy. “Come on. Looks like you get to be my escort to the bathroom.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a bodyguard,” Kennedy said.

Mason lifted his cell, tapping the screen. “Be safe. Watch your back.” Mason pulled Isabella closer. “I’m serious. Just because all my men in here surround us doesn’t mean we can let our guard down. I haven’t heard from Cruz yet, but Andrew and his team will be here soon enough.” He kissed her cheek. His soft lips lingered on her skin like the warm sun. It wrapped around her body as if to give her a protective shield. But the moment he pulled away, she shivered. “Are you sure about this? Do you really think you can back him and Adrian into a corner?”

“Sparrow got Jeff to name Andrew as the man who hired him.” Mason squeezed her biceps. “I don’t understand Andrew’s game completely. Jeff was told to shoot the front tire. Not hurt anyone. He was told that Andrew’s team would let him get away. My best guess—and I don’t like to guess—is that because of how many of my people were here, Andrew aborted. Now all we have to do is either get Adrian to roll or Andrew to follow us.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Isabella whispered.

“Babe, it’s going to be over soon and you can get on with the pageant. Trust me.” Boldly, he patted her ass. “Go. Freshen up. Your right eyelash isn’t quite right.”

She cocked her head and her lips curled into a smile. “Aw, that’s so sweet you noticed.”

“Oh my God. I can’t watch this.” Kennedy tugged her arm. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t make me come charging into the ladies’ room, because you know I will.” Mason winked.

“You two are a little disgusting.” Kennedy pushed open the bathroom door.

Isabella leaned against the sink, her mind and heart conflicted between the events of the day and the swirling emotions that filled her soul.

Mason—that man—was everything she’d dreamed of as a little girl. He was strong. Protective. Decisive and calm during a crisis. Loving and warm in the aftermath. He was kind. Sweet. And a little goofy.

It was easy to look past all their differences. His clothing didn’t make him who he was as a human the same way it did her. It didn’t define him. It wasn’t what people saw or how they judged him as a person. For Isabella, it was all people saw and she’d played into it like a fiddle. This last week she’d learned there was more to her than lashes and stilettos and she wanted to know that Isabella.

“I think I’m falling in love with him.” Isabella lifted her gaze and blinked.

“That’s obvious.” Kennedy laughed.

“It doesn’t make any sense. How can it be possible? He’s nothing like who I pictured myself with, not to mention when this is all over, he’s going to go back to his tiny little town in the middle of nowhere, living with his buddy, Ryder.”

“Do you feel like you’re competing with Ryder for Mason’s attention? Because when you and Ryder are in the same room, you’re all Mason sees,” Kennedy said.

Isabella shook her head. “What’s more insane is I know Mason is falling as hard and fast too.”

Kennedy leaned in, squeezing her forearms. “Both of you are under extreme pressure. When all of this is over, go on a nice romantic date. Make things normal.”

“There’s nothing normal about me and Mason being a couple.” Isabella laughed. “I’m champagne and he’s beer.”

“Looks like he’s upping his game to some whiskey and maybe you can meet him in the middle with a mixed drink.” Kennedy lowered her chin. “Like you did when you went fly fishing.”

“You know, that was kind of fun, but is there another way to do that because I don’t ever want to wear rubber pants again.”

“Okay, so there might be some things about you that will never change.” Kennedy wrapped her arms around Isabella and hugged her tight. “I’m so glad to have you back in my life.”

“You and me both.” Isabella sighed. “I don’t think I’ve had a close girlfriend since you and I lost touch.”

“Hard to find someone who isn’t a backstabbing bitch,” Kennedy said. “When the pageant is over, we need a girls’ night.”

“How about a double date? Ryder’s awfully handsome.”

Kennedy took a step back. “Thank you, but no.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll admit he’s nice to look at, but I’m not interested. Besides, I’m way too busy and I’ll be leaving soon anyway.” Kennedy dug into her purse and pulled out her lip gloss. She leaned over the sink and pursed her lips. She was the kind of woman who could fit into any situation. She could carry off any outfit from jeans and a T-shirt to a ballgown. She could go to a barbecue and be laid back, relaxed, without a care in the world. Or she could attend one of the Sinclair Foundation’s big events, decked to the nines, looking like she should grace the cover of magazines. She didn’t mind getting her hands dirty and she would play the part of a socialite when it was called upon.

And she did it all with ease.

Isabella envied that. It wasn't that she didn't believe she could look good in different attire; it was that she couldn't dare be seen in it. She had an image to uphold, and while Kennedy did too, she had a little more leeway and it had more to do with protecting her than perception. Isabella had to be on the moment she stepped out of her home. If she attended a party at a friend's house, she had to do so as the Queen of Pageants, not as Isabella Carter—whoever that was.

“Where are you—”

The door burst open.

Isabella turned and gasped.

“Good afternoon, ladies.” Andrew pointed a gun in her face.

Another man whom she didn't recognize stood next to him, carrying what looked like a machine gun.

Kennedy dropped her lip gloss in the sink and jumped in front of Isabella. “What the hell do you think you're doing? Aren't you supposed to be meeting with the rest of the security detail or something?”

“Change in plans. Isabella's coming with me.” Andrew smiled. “Mason's orders.”

Every inch of Isabella's body froze. Her lips wouldn't move. Her feet were glued to the ground. Her brain couldn't pull a coherent thought together. All she could manage was to stare at the gun in Andrew's hand as the fear bubbled from her belly like a volcano.

“I don't believe for one second Mason—or anyone from his team—sent you in here with guns blazing to collect Isabella.” Kennedy reached behind her and took Isabella by the hand, squeezing hard. “You need to leave.”

“Not without Isabella.” Andrew cocked his head. “Take care of her.” He stretched out his arm, but Kennedy boldly stepped in his way.

“You stupid bitch.” He backhanded Kennedy across the cheek. She flew into the sink, smacking her forehead on the

counter. Her body slowly slinked to the floor as her lids fluttered over her eyes. Blood trickled from the side of her head, over her ear, and down her neck. Her shoulders slumped and she looked lifeless.

Isabella opened her mouth and let out a scream. However, it was cut short by Andrew's hand covering her mouth. "You're going to keep your mouth shut and do exactly what I say, or I'll put a bullet in your body and then your boyfriend's after that, got it?"

She nodded.

Andrew yanked her through the bathroom door, pausing first as he peered both ways down the hallway.

She glanced over her shoulder, tears burning a hot path down her cheeks. Her heart hammered so fast in her chest she could barely catch her breath. Mason wouldn't wait more than another ten minutes tops for her return. Even though they barely knew each other, he understood her routine. He knew how long it would have taken her to freshen her face.

Besides, he would be worried.

He'd find Kennedy.

And then he'd find her.

He had to.



MASON TOOK off his sport coat, gently folded it, and set it over the back of the chair. He adjusted his weapon holster, making sure Adrian got a good look. Mason wasn't one for intimidation tactics—except when someone he cared about was threatened.

Then he'd go to any lengths to make his point.

"I appreciate your time," Mason said.

"I'm not sure how I can help. I don't understand what's going on. This pageant has always been the picture of style and grace. Nothing like this has ever happened before in its history." Adrian waved his hands dramatically.

“You know as well as I do that Isabella is making changes, and it’s upsetting someone. I need to know who that person is.”

Adrian let out an audible sigh. “That could be any number of people.” He wagged his finger. “For the record, I’m for the changes, but I did recommend she wait a year.”

“Isabella didn’t mention anything about that to me,” Mason said.

“No offense, but you’re her boyfriend. You don’t know the first thing about this world. Why would she? Besides, she didn’t take my advice; my job is to support her, not cause more problems.”

“I’m going to be honest with you.” Mason rested his hand on his weapon for effect. “I don’t believe you. Actually, I think you had a hand in what happened today, and I want answers.”

Adrian jerked his head back. His beady eyes narrowed. “I’m offended. You don’t know me. I would never do anything to hurt Isabella. She’s the face of all pageants across this nation. She’s taken failing contests and put them back on the map. She’s why so many people view them as something other than women strutting across the stage in bathing suits.”

“Did you really think we wouldn’t find out that you tried to buy the Pikes Peak Princess Pageant from Helen? Come on, Adrian. Talk to me. Otherwise, I can’t help you when this shit goes down and people start going to prison. We’ve already caught Jeff. He’s tossing people under the bus left and right. It’s only a matter of time. Tell me what you know and I’ll put in a good word with the cops.”

Adrian folded his skinny little arms across his chest and scoffed. “I don’t know anything.”

Mason’s phone buzzed. He lifted it from his pocket and glanced at the text from Cruz. “Fuck,” he muttered.

Cruz: *Andrew gave us the slip. He was clearing a side street and stepped into a building. I followed. He went out the back door where a vehicle was waiting for him in the alley. They drove off. He left his phone, so no way of tracking. I got*

the plate. It's registered to Peter Banks. We're on our way back with the rest of Andrew's team. Sparrow has a chopper in the air, looking for the vehicle, but we haven't spotted it.

This was not good.

Mason stood, glancing over his shoulder. "Trent," he called to one of the Falco brothers, another member of the Brotherhood Protectors. "Stay with him. Got it?" He tapped his comms. "Lock down the conference center. No one comes in or out, except my team. Not without my approval. Everyone is on high alert. This is not a drill."

A dozen *roger thats* came across in his ear.

He raced out the door and rounded the corner, barreling into the bathroom where he found Kennedy sprawled out on the floor, unconscious. His heart fell to his toes like a brick.

He swallowed, hard.

Dropping to his knees, he pressed his fingers against her neck. Strong pulse. Good. He examined her body for bullet wounds and other injuries. He found only two small cuts and a major bump on the side of her head. He gently cradled Kennedy's face, tapping her shoulders. "Wake up, Kennedy. Come on. Open your eyes. You can do it."

Her lids fluttered and she groaned.

"That's it. You're okay. I've got you."

Her eyes grew wide. "Isabella. Andrew came in here with a gun and another man and he took her. I tried to stop him—"

"And got clocked in the process," Mason said softly as he took a paper towel and blotted the blood. He pressed his ear. "Andrew is in the building. He's armed with at least one other gunman and he has Isabella." Mason might have sounded calm, but he wasn't. Fear gripped his soul like it had the night Mary Lou had died.

Ryder and Nash burst into the bathroom with the local sheriff. The sheriff helped Kennedy to her feet.

"She needs a medic. She's got a concussion," Mason said.

“I’ll take care of her.” The sheriff nodded.

“We need to find which exit Andrew is headed to.” Mason raked a hand through his hair, feeling the crunch of the gel. Isabella was going to have something to say about that when she saw the mess. “Contact Cruz. Find out if he has a good handle on which of Andrew’s men are in on this scheme. He mentioned he didn’t believe they all were. I don’t know if he can find anything out that way, but it’s worth a shot.” He pushed between Nash and Ryder, marching through the door and back into the conference room. “Adrian, where is Andrew taking Isabella and don’t bullshit me. You have ten seconds to give me an answer.” Mason took out his gun, holding it at his side.

Adrian stood, his mouth gaping open. “What are you talking about? What happened?”

“Five seconds.” Mason glared.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Adrian sputtered.

“Andrew kidnapped Isabella.” Mason stepped closer. He grabbed Adrian by the shirt and slammed him against the wall. “Start talking or—”

Ryder gripped his shoulder. He didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to.

Mason took in a slow breath. “Her life is in real danger.”

Adrian’s eyes widened. “No one was supposed to get hurt. I just wanted to scare her so she’d walk away from the pageant. I thought she’d give up, believing it was too much trouble. She did that once before, although that was before she bought it. I just wanted the pageant. It should have been mine. I worked for years under Helen and she screwed me. It wasn’t fair. I offered her a—”

“I don’t care about that. I care about my girlfriend. Where is Andrew taking her?” Mason lifted Adrian off the floor, but Ryder intervened.

“I don’t know. This wasn’t part of the plan. I swear.”

“What did you hire Andrew to do?” Ryder asked.

“To scare her. A few members of his team were going to allow things to happen to make her go away. That’s all. She was never supposed to get hurt. I like Isabella, I really do.” Adrian’s eyes filled with tears. “The only thing I can think of is that Andrew wanted me to put pressure on her for his contract. I told him that wasn’t part of the deal. That if I got the pageant, his job was secure. If she didn’t leave, it wasn’t my problem.”

“Mason,” Cruz’s voice boomed in his ear. “I’m in the west parking garage. We’ve got a lock on Peter’s car. Want me to disable it?”

“Do it,” Mason said. “Who’s near the west exit?”

“Me and Asher,” Kent said over the comms. “No sign of Andrew and Isabella yet.”

“Ryder, Nash, and I are on our way. Keep your eyes peeled. Cruz, where is the rest of Andrew’s team?” Mason took off running down the hall. Ryder and Nash were right at his side.

“I have them waiting outside the garage with Darius, Troy, Trent, and Heath,” Cruz said.

“Have them stay there. Make sure they are ready for anything. But keep Andrew’s team in the dark.” Mason’s heart thumped in his throat like a frog trying to escape.

“We hear you loud and clear,” Darius said.

Mason glanced to his right, catching Ryder’s gaze. “If Andrew hurts her, I’m going to kill him and you’re not going to stop me.”

CHAPTER 13



“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?” Isabella wobbled down the hallway. For the first time in years, she felt uneasy in heels. Her ankles felt as though they might collapse at any second. The cold metal of Andrew’s gun pressed firmly in her side sent a frozen chill through her system. “What have I ever done to you?”

“For starters, you bought this pageant,” Andrew said. “Then you hired the Brotherhood Protectors, making my security company look incompetent. To make matters worse, you brought in Mason. That guy is like a bad rash that won’t go away. All you had to do was let Adrian have the pageant. Or at the very least, sign off on my company. You couldn’t even do that.” He shoved his gun deeper into her side, if that were possible. He peered around the corner as they came closer to the west exit near the auxiliary parking garage entrance.

She breathed in through her nose and let it out with a swish, doing her best to remain calm. She tried to think about what Mason might do in this situation. “You increased your prices and without looking into other companies, I couldn’t just sign it.” Maybe she’d watched too many suspense movies over the years, but she figured talking might buy her some time. Give Mason the opportunity to put a plan into place and save her ass.

God, she hated needed saving in the first place. She’d always been so fiercely independent. Her father had humble

beginnings and made his money on his own. She wanted to do the same thing.

And she'd done it in spades.

Everything she had she worked hard for.

The loan she'd taken from her father years ago, she'd paid back, with interest. Now she could afford to help her dad, not that he'd take her money. He was too proud for that. And he didn't really need it.

"But I still don't understand why you're kidnapping me? Why you didn't just come to me. I'm a reasonable person."

"But your boyfriend is not and once he showed up with his band of brothers." Andrew yanked her back around a corner, shoving her up against a wall. "Especially Ryder, I knew the Brotherhood Protectors would get the contract. It's all but a done deal. And I want to see that man suffer. Do you have any idea what it's like to be in his shadow? The golden child of the Air Force. The captain of the hockey team. Because of that asshole, I was never selected for Special Warfare and my career in the military was cut short."

"How is that his fault? I thought you opted not to reenlist?"

Andrew stuck his head around the corner. He waved to the other man with the machine gun, who jogged out in front, his boots pounding against the tile.

"Only because Mason ruined everything for me. When he first got here, I had planned on following through with what Adrian wanted, but as things progressed, I thought payback was a better option. He took from me what was most important in my life. Now I'm going to take what he cares about most." Andrew smiled wickedly. "And that's you."

In that moment, Isabella's only thought was she would die without being able to tell the one man she'd ever loved how she felt.



"STOP," Mason whispered, holding up his hand. "Look."

A man with a machine gun raced down the hallway in front of him. He tapped his comms. “Cruz, one armed man headed for the door. What did you do to Peter’s vehicle?”

“Let’s just say, it won’t start,” Cruz said.

Mason glanced over his shoulder. “Nash, there’s another service door down that corridor. As you as good a shot as everyone says you are?”

“I am,” Nash said.

“You have my permission to take it if we can’t take him down peacefully or things go to shit.” Mason nodded. “Go.”

“Cruz. I’m sending Nash out the service exit. I’m letting them out the door. Nash has permission to fire. I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that. Ryder and I will follow once Isabella and...”

Andrew appeared in the hallway. He held Isabella tight, gun at her side.

Mason sucked in a deep breath. “Andrew is headed for the door. I’ll be outside thirty seconds after they are. Let’s try not to let them get in the car. Wait until you see me and Ryder before showing yourself.” He crouched, making sure he couldn’t be seen. Being patient was part of the job. It was something he prided himself on, but it was hard when the woman he loved was being held at gunpoint.

Love.

It bubbled through his veins like a raging river. It was wild and out of control. There was no containing it and he didn’t bother trying. It had happened at the most inopportune time. But Isabella had become his world. His soul. His heart.

Mary Lou would have approved.

“Let’s move,” he said as she disappeared outside. He and Ryder hauled ass. Once they made it to the exit, he slowly pulled back the door. He peeked outside.

Andrew and Isabella were twenty paces from the vehicle in question. Mason couldn’t decide if it had been a smart move on Andrew to pick the part of the garage that they had

purposely kept empty or brilliant. Either way, it made it easy for them to spot.

His man held open the driver's door.

Mason glanced over his shoulder.

Nash positioned himself on the staircase, his weapon at the ready.

Time to play hardball.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going?” Mason held his gun to his side. Raising it at this moment would only put Andrew more on the defensive.

Andrew spun, holding Isabella as a shield as he backed toward the car.

His man, who Mason assumed was Peter, raised his machine gun, pointing it at Mason's chest.

Cruz appeared near the hood of the car. “I'd lower that if I were you.”

“He's not doing anything,” Andrew said. “You shoot him, I kill her, and that's not the outcome you want.”

“Let her go,” Mason said behind a tight jaw. “You won't get past the garage. I've got men everywhere.” He held Isabella's gaze.

Her eyes were wide with sheer terror. Her poor hair was all over the place. She'd lost an eyelash. Her lipstick had been smeared and her makeup ruined by tears.

That was going to piss her off when she looked in the mirror and he was going to make sure she had that chance. Nothing was going to happen to her now. He would make damn sure of it.

“Oh, you're going to let me drive out of here if you ever want to see her alive again,” Andrew said.

“I don't have a shot. I need Isabella to either duck or move to the right,” Nash said over the comms.

“Really, and what will be your demands? Because we both know you’re not going to let her live. And how the hell do you believe for one second you’ll get away with this?” Mason shifted, hoping Andrew would follow. Time was not on his side.

Ryder moved as well.

Andrew didn’t budge.

Fucker.

“If you must know, I’ll manage to make this your fault, because you’re so damned predictable. You’ll follow me. And you’re right. She’ll die. But you’ll be seen as the reason why, and I’ll be the hero. The one who managed to try to save her from the clutches of a man who is incompetent and only after her money.”

Mason couldn’t help it. He laughed. Hard and loud.

Andrew’s face hardened. He hated it when anyone dared make fun of him. He inched to his left, moving slightly in front of Isabella.

“I’ve got a shot,” Nash said. “But I’m worried about Mr. Machine Gun.”

“I’ll handle him.” Cruz inched closer to the man holding the big weapon. “Take the shot on three.”

Mason counted down, prepared to leap forward.

Three. Two. One.

Bang! Bang!

Andrew jerked back as the first bullet tore through his shoulder.

The second one hit his knee.

Cruz lunged forward, disarming the man with the machine gun, knocking him to the ground.

Isabella screamed, stumbling sideways.

Andrew reached out, grabbing her ankle.

Mason ran toward her, catching her before she landed face down on the pavement. He stepped on Andrew's hand. Mason kicked him in the gut as he lifted Isabella into his arms. "You're going to prison for a very long time, asshole."

Ryder knelt on the ground in front of Andrew. "You fucked with the wrong man, again."

"I'm bleeding out. I need something to put pressure on these wounds," Andrew cried.

Mason ignored the man. Sirens blared in the background. Cops and paramedics would deal with all that.

Isabella tucked her face into his neck and wept.

He carried her to the staircase, passing Nash on the way. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Anytime," Nash said.

Gently, he tried to set her on the steps, but she wouldn't let go of the death grip she had on his body, so he turned and sat, holding her close, rubbing her back. "I've got you. It's okay. It's over. He's never going to hurt you or your pageants again. Neither is Adrian. You're safe."

"What about Kennedy?" Isabella managed through guttural sobs.

"She's got a bump on her head, but she's fine." Mason kissed Isabella's temple. "Babe, it's okay. Really. I'm never going to let anything happen to you. Ever. I love you." The words rolled off his tongue like the finest whiskey. It was smooth. Nothing in his life had ever felt so right. Not even hockey or the military. It was like everything he'd done before had led him to this moment.

She lifted her head. "What did you say?"

He brushed the hair from her face and gazed into her beautiful eyes. They filled with love and perhaps a little shock. He chuckled. "Too soon? Wrong moment? Not romantic enough?"

She cupped his face. "I honestly thought I was going to die and all I could think about was that I finally found someone

who understood me. Someone whom I loved and could love me back for who I am, not what the world wants me to be.”

Taking her chin with his thumb and forefinger, he pressed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss. “So, you love me, eh?”

“With every fiber of my being.”

“Well, as the luckiest man in the world, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you lost an eyelash.”

“Oh jeez,” she whispered, lifting her hand and tugging at the one left, ripping it off.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”

“It doesn’t feel great, but I’d rather wear none than one.” She snuggled into his shoulder. “Is this really over? Can my pageant go on?”

“Only if it’s my men who are on protection detail.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

CHAPTER 14



MASON SAT in Isabella's office at the conference center. The new Pikes Peak Princess had been crowned an hour ago. The rest of the pageant had gone off without a hitch.

Well, mostly.

The reporters had been camped out in front of Isabella's building and they were relentless in getting an interview. They wanted the scope on what exactly had gone down and why. Mason had wanted nothing to do with that shit show, but Jake—his boss—had forced his hand. He was team leader—and officially Isabella's boyfriend. It was his job to inform the press. Ease the public's fears.

So he and Isabella made a joint statement two days ago.

He hadn't been prepared for two things.

The first had been all the questions directed at him. He could understand if they were regarding the protection detail and what had happened to Andrew. But all the press could focus on was his relationship with Isabella and when wedding bells might be ringing.

The second was chatter about his attire. He'd gone out to his car in his old jeans and T-shirt and a reporter had snapped his picture. The headline hadn't been kind. Isabella found it only slightly amusing. But he totally understood why she had to be dressed to the nines even if she was only going to the grocery store.

"The conference center has been cleared," Asher said, standing in the doorway, Kent at his side.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Mason nodded. “You’re free to head back to Fool’s Gold.”

“We’ll see you back at the office.” Asher turned and strolled down the hallway.

A few minutes later, Ryder and Cruz strolled in carrying a couple of knee hockey nets.

Mason burst out laughing. “Oh, you two freaks are on.” The three of them had been playing knee hockey since they were kids. It was something they did on their travel and summer leagues while staying in hotels. It was supposed to keep them out of trouble, but all it did was nearly get them tossed out on their collective asses.

He snagged a stick, took off his tux jacket, flicked his suspenders, and got down on his knees, flinging the puck directly at Ryder’s face.

Ryder batted it out of the air, over Cruz’s head.

Cruz lunged for the puck, stretching out his arm, using his wrist to pull it closer to his body. He always had soft hands, but Mason had always been quick, and he snatched the little rubber puck right off Cruz’s stick.

“You little asshole.” Cruz laughed.

Scooting around on his knees, Mason made his move toward the net, but Ryder had other plans and ones that had nothing to do with knee hockey. He tackled Mason as if they were playing football.

“What the fuck,” Mason said, rolling on his back, shoving Ryder to the side before yanking at his shirt and dragging him back.

“Oh my God. What the hell?” Isabella’s voice screeched across his ears much like his mother’s had when she’d yell at him from a hotel room, telling him to stop before someone complained. “Are we ten? You three are acting like a bunch of toddlers.”

Mason burst out laughing.

“And you’re ruining your tuxedo.” She stood near his head, tapping her perfectly manicured toe that peeked from under her sparkly ball gown. She glared down with her hands on her hips. “Seriously, do you have any idea how much that cost?”

“No.” Mason cleared his throat. He rolled, pushing himself upright. “Sorry, babe. We were just letting off a little steam. It’s kind of a ritual for us.”

“Well, next time, change your clothes.” She reached up and tangled her fingers through a few strands of hair. “You’ve got to stop messing up my work. Especially when you know there will be loads of photographers waiting to snap our pictures.”

“Yes, dear,” Mason said.

“Oh my God. You’re whipped.” Ryder slapped his back.

“You’re just jealous.” Mason smiled.

Isabella took two steps toward her desk. She paused, placing her hands on the top and breathing deeply.

“Babe, are you okay?” Mason rested his hand on her back, rubbing in circles.

“Just a little dizzy. I don’t think I’ve had enough to eat these last few days. And maybe still a little shaken up.”

This had been the second dizzy spell she’d gotten today. And she’d had one yesterday.

“That’s understandable,” Cruz said. “But know that Adrian is cooperating with police. That will help when Andrew goes to trial.”

“They’ve got him on a plethora of charges,” Ryder added. “He’s going away for a long time.”

Mason appreciated his friends’ kind words. However, he knew that was only one thing that had Isabella—and him—spooked. But until they knew for sure, there was no reason to say a word.

“Well, I better get going,” Cruz said. “It’s not a long drive, but I want to get home.”

“Thanks for everything, man. I can’t tell you how much your support has meant.” Mason gave Cruz a manly bro hug.

Ryder hung back for a moment, leaning against the wall. “This has been fun and all, but I should go too.”

“Why don’t you come out with us,” Isabella asked. “Kennedy is coming. It could be like a double date.”

“Yeah. That would fun. Like old times.” Mason smiled, sitting on the corner of the desk.

“Oh no. Thanks for the offer, but I think I’ll pass.” Ryder squeezed Mason’s shoulder. “See you at home.” Ryder stuffed his hands in his pockets and strolled out the door.

“I wish he’d stay. I bet he and Kennedy would really hit it off.” Isabella wrapped her arms around Mason, positioning herself between his legs.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, but there will be plenty of other times.” He kissed her nose. “I hate to be a party pooper, but can we blow this whole thing off? I can only stay the night. Then I have to get back to work.”

“You could twist my arm.” She winked.

“This entire week was insane and it’s hard to believe the man who thought he could never love, fell so hard and so fast. But I do love you, Isabella Carter.” He pressed his hand over her middle. “No matter what.”

She glanced down for a brief moment before catching his gaze. “It’s still too early to even take a test.”

“You didn’t feel well this morning. You’ve been dizzy. I might not know very much about being a woman, but my sister was pregnant four times. I know the signs.”

“It could be anything,” she said weakly. “You act like this doesn’t scare the crap out of you.”

“Oh, I’m utterly terrified. But not as scared as watching Andrew hold a gun to you. I’d be lost without you in my life. I

never want to know what that feels like.”

“Aw, that’s got to be the sweetest, most romantic thing you’ve ever said.” She kissed his cheek.

“Give me time, I might come up with a few more.” Mason had found home.

EPILOGUE



THREE WEEKS LATER...

THE MATTRESS SHIFTED. Mason blinked open his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to be sick.” Isabella raced out of the bedroom, slamming the door against the wall as she raced down the hallway to the only bathroom in Mason and Ryder’s home.

“Shit,” Mason mumbled as he threw his legs to the side of the bed. He didn’t keep much from his best friend, but he wasn’t prepared to let this secret out yet. Not so much because he wasn’t excited or happy about it, because he was thrilled. But Isabella wanted to wait before telling anyone. She wanted to get through the first trimester and that was something he could understand.

Before he could even stand, Ryder was banging on the door. “I need to use the toilet. How long is your girlfriend going to be in there? She tends to take forever. It’s annoying.”

Mason chuckled. “She’s not getting ready for anything. I’m sure she’ll be out in a minute.”

Ryder glanced over his shoulder. “I think something is wrong with her. It sounded like she was coughing and gagging.”

That was one thing about being pregnant that Mason wished he could make go away for Isabella. The last week had been the worst and it wasn’t getting any better. Her doctor said it could last through the first three months, or even longer. Not to mention, Isabella wasn’t handling that part well.

Isabella appeared in the hallway. “I need crackers and something fizzy without the fizz.” She tugged at her ponytail as she pushed past Ryder wearing Mason’s shirt and boxers. She’d decided that she liked them better than her fancy nightgowns, especially when they slept apart.

He didn’t care what she wore; she’d look sexy in a paper bag.

Ryder arched a brow. “Good morning, Isabella.”

“Nothing good about it unless I can keep down a cracker.” She climbed back into bed, flopping on her back, holding her stomach. “Even saying the word cracker makes me want to lose my cookies. If this lasts more than a few weeks, I’m going to hurt your best friend.” She glared at Ryder. “It’s all his fault.”

“What happened to keeping this between us?” Mason said. “Not to mention it takes two to tango.” Mason leaned back, fluffing a pillow.

Ryder had the balls to toss his head back and laugh. “Ah, the lack of condoms is coming back to bite you both in the ass.”

She turned her head. “He knew about that?”

“You’ll learn there isn’t much I don’t know,” Ryder said. “I’ll go find you some crackers and something to settle your stomach.”

“You can bring me some coffee.” Mason wrapped his arm around Isabella.

“No. Neither of you can have that. It makes me want to vomit. And I learned last night chicken does too. So when I’m in this house, those two things are not allowed.”

“Fucking wonderful,” Ryder said. “Do you have any idea what a beast Mason is without his morning caffeine?”

“You’re no bowl of cherries either.” Mason reached for the puck on his nightstand and tossed it at Ryder.

“Wait until Cruz hears this news.” Ryder snagged the puck with his fingers.

“No. You can’t tell him,” Mason said. “Not yet and I don’t think I have to explain why.”

“I get it.” Ryder nodded. “Let me go get you something to settle your stomach.” He disappeared down the hallway.

“I’m sorry you’re so sick.” Mason kissed her temple.

“Goes with the territory, I guess.” She rested her head on his chest. “Sorry I let the cat out of the bag. But he is your best friend and I already told Kennedy, but why don’t you want to tell Cruz? The three of you are like some cosmic love triangle.”

“It’s complicated and has to do with my frustrations over why he left his wife,” Mason admitted. “I love Cruz like a brother, and we’ll tell him after we get past the first trimester. I actually don’t like keeping things from him, but this is one thing that is best to keep under wraps for now.”

“I’m not ready to tell my dad or Leah, so I’m good with keeping it a secret for now.”

“I’ve been thinking about a few things.”

She lifted her head, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Don’t strain yourself, big fella.”

“I see you haven’t lost your sense of humor. That’s good.” He batted her nose. “But seriously. We’re having a baby together and I don’t want us to be living separately when that happens. I sure as shit don’t want to live with Ryder forever. I love the man, but this house is no place to raise a baby.”

“Neither is my penthouse.” She sighed. “What are you proposing?”

That word hung in his brain—and his heart—like a hammer. “Colorado Springs would be a tough commute for me, but I could make it work if I had to.”

“No. It would be easier for me to move here. The Pikes Peak Pageant is only once a year. I’d have to travel some for my other ones, but I have people to run them. I can move my headquarters here.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Not you. Us.” She pressed her warm lips against his neck. “Our family, because we can’t pretend it’s not happening. We’re choosing to have this baby. To be in a relationship. I want this to work. I love you.”

“I love you right back,” he said. “What about getting married? I don’t have a ring, but we can go to the store today and get one. I know how particular you are about things, so I’d want you to have whatever makes you happy.”

“Did you actually just propose to her like that?” Ryder stood at the edge of the bed holding a can of pop and a sleeve of crackers. “That has to be the worst marriage proposal I’ve ever heard, especially to the Queen of Pageants.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Ryder,” Isabella said. “It was utterly perfect. Now leave, unless you want a lesson on how babies are made.”

“I don’t need to be asked twice.” Ryder left the crackers and soda on the nightstand and scurried out of the room, closing the door.

“So, that was a yes? We’re getting married. Getting our own place here in Fool’s Gold.” Never in a million years did Mason believe this is where his life would land.

“Yes to it all.”

He glanced to the ceiling. “Mary Lou, did you hear that? Your little brother is getting married. He’s going to be a father.”

Isabella palmed his cheek. “I wish I could have known her.”

“You don’t think it’s weird I just talked to her? Because I do that sometimes.”

“I think it’s sweet, and I look forward to you telling our little girl all about her aunt Mary Lou.”

“What if we have a boy?” Mason asked.

“I wouldn’t know what to do with a boy, so we’re having a girl. I’m willing it to happen.”

Mason burst out laughing. “Not on my watch. I don’t think I could handle another one of you.”

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ABOUT JEN TALTY

Jen Talty is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Paranormal Romance. In the fall of 2020, her short story was selected and featured in a 1001 Dark Nights Anthology.

Regardless of the genre, her goal is to take you on a ride that will leave you floating under the sun with warmth in your heart. She writes stories about broken heroes and heroines who aren't necessarily looking for romance, but in the end, they find the kind of love books are written about :).

She first started writing while carting her kids to one hockey rink after the other, averaging 170 games per year between 3 kids in 2 countries and 5 states. Her first book, IN TWO WEEKS was originally published in 2007. In 2010 she helped form a publishing company (Cool Gus Publishing) with *NY Times* Bestselling Author Bob Mayer where she ran the technical side of the business through 2016.

Jen is currently enjoying the next phase of her life...the empty nester! She and her husband reside in Jupiter, Florida.

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ABOUT ELLE JAMES

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