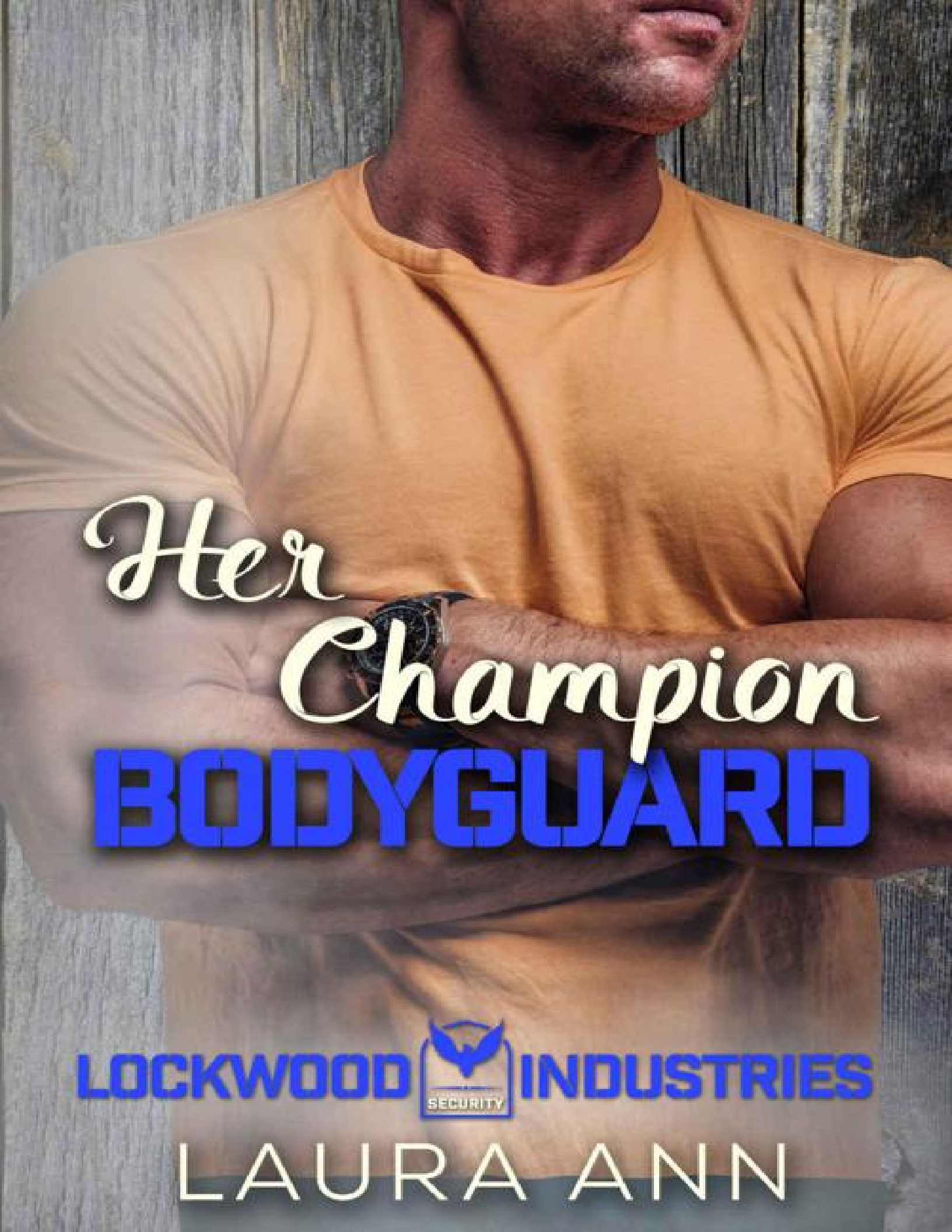
Her Champion
BODYGUARD
LOCKWOOD INDUSTRIES
SECURITY
LAURA ANN

“Her Champion Bodyguard”

Lockwood Industries #4

By Laura Ann

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

HER CHAMPION BODYGUARD

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DEDICATION

To my horse loving twin.
One day we'll actually ride one
and I'm so excited to share that with you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No author works alone. Thank you, Victorine.
You and your sister make it Christmas every time
I get a new cover. And thank you to my Beta Team and editor.
Truly, your help with my stories is immeasurable.
And another thank you to Beck. Your willingness to share
your horse expertise was SO appreciated.
Thank you!

NEWSLETTER

You can get a FREE book by joining my Reading Family!
Every week we share stories, sales and good old fun.
To get in on the action, just click **HERE**

CHAPTER 1

"It's happening again," Kinsley whispered to her father.

"What?" Garrett Storm pushed a hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair with a deep sigh. He glanced around before leaning closer. "What was it this time?"

Kinsley kept her eye on the equestrian currently working his way around the arena as she spoke, praying no one could see the panic in her eyes. "My boots were missing from my tack. I had to grab a different pair I keep on hand for emergencies."

"Are they broken in?" Garrett asked.

"No. These ones happen to be brand new." Kinsley wiggled her toes, trying to ease the tightness of the boots. She knew the stiff sensation could easily be a distraction while she rode. *Which is probably exactly what this guy wants.*

Garrett hung his head and cursed quietly. "How does this keep happening and nobody sees a thing?"

Kinsley shrugged, finally looking over at her father. The years since her mother's death had aged him far more than normal for a man in his fifties, and the past six months hadn't helped any. Heavy wrinkles lined his forehead and the bags under his eyes testified of sleepless nights and stressful days. "It has to be someone who's around all the time. People would notice a stranger, but the fact that whoever this is keeps getting in and out without detection tells me that it's someone within our group."

Garrett nodded. "That's my thinking, too." He narrowed his eyes at the current rider. "The most logical idea would be a fellow competitor." He turned to Kinsley and dropped his voice. "Mary Ann, perhaps?"

Kinsley squished her lips to the side and turned back to the arena. "I thought of her," she admitted. "But I don't know if she's the kind of person to get her hands dirty. I mean, even for someone as spoiled as she, it's pretty low to try to sabotage the competition." Kinsley paused. "I think she's more the type to mess with me mentally than physically. Like her backhanded compliments and stuff."

"Maybe..." Garrett took a deep breath. "We need to get to the bottom of this though. I'm afraid if it continues, it's going to escalate into something far worse than missing pieces of equipment." He glanced at her feet. "As it is, you'll probably have blisters by the end of the day."

Kinsley nodded, knowing he was right. Wearing brand new boots for an entire competition was definitely not ideal.

Garrett wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed his daughter tight. "Let me talk to Quentin," he said, referring to a friend of the family. "I know the Gruffmans have dealt with security problems in the past. He might have some suggestions about how to proceed."

"Well, whatever we do, it needs to be later because it's time for me to get ready."

Garrett kissed the top of her head. "I'll walk you back."

Together they headed toward the stalls where Kinsley's horse, Amadeus, stood waiting patiently for his master.

"Hello, my gorgeous boy," Kinsley purred as she got closer. She put her hands on either side of her horse's head and slid them up his cheeks and neck, reveling in the silky feeling of his hair. Kinsley put her forehead to his and took a deep breath. "Everything's all right when you're around, isn't it?" she murmured.

Amadeus snorted and nodded his head in agreement.

Kinsley laughed and stepped back to open the gate, keeping her hand on his side the whole time. "Let's get you all saddled and ready to go, huh? We're going to show those spectators what a real horse can do."

Again, the horse responded, and Garrett shook his head. "You and your horse. It's like you can actually talk to each other."

Kinsley smiled widely. "We can. Didn't you know I'm bilingual?"

Garrett grinned and shook his head. "I've always loved horses, but you take it to a whole other level."

Kinsley blinked rapidly as the sting of tears came to her eyes. "Must be a combination of you and Mom," she said softly. Although Louise Storm had never touched a horse until after she married Kinsley's father, the sweet, gentle woman had never met an animal she couldn't tame. There was just something about her that any animal, horses included, could sense, and they adored her.

Kinsley always prayed she'd gotten the best of both worlds. She got her love of horses from her father and an uncanny ability to connect with even

the most stubborn of personalities from her mother.

"She'd be so proud of you," Garrett said softly, then cleared his throat. "Anyway, let's get this ol' boy saddled and out to the waiting area. They'll be calling your name soon."

Amadeus blew out a long breath and stomped his foot.

"Better watch it, Dad," Kinsley said with a smile. "He doesn't like being called old."

Garrett rolled his eyes. "My apologies."

Kinsley smiled even wider when Amadeus nodded in reply. "All righty. Time to get this done." She put her white pad on Amadeus's back, then lugged the hunter saddle up and over. Kinsley made short work of attaching all the belts, the routine second nature to her after so many years of practice. At last, she put the harness on and led her beautiful stallion out of the stall and started down the hall.

"Is it your turn already?" a young man asked as he meandered down the hall toward Kinsley.

She smiled at Tyrone, who helped make sure everything was just right for her at every event. "Almost. Have you seen Coach Ritton?"

Tyrone's cheeks flushed and his eyes dropped to the ground while he pointed further down the corridor. "Yeah. He's waiting for you."

"Thanks," Kinsley murmured. With another smile, she took off. *I'll bet Coach chewed Ty out again. Poor kid. He doesn't deserve to be treated like that.*

Tyrone had been working for Coach Ritton for several years, ever since the young man graduated from high school. He ran odd jobs, kept the tack clean, and generally did anything and everything the coach needed. Being one of the best coaches in the country, any position on Coach Ritton's staff was a coveted one, but that didn't make him any easier to work for.

He was known as the Gordon Ramsay of the horse world, and truth be told, if he wasn't as good as he was, Kinsley would have moved on a long time ago. She wasn't fond of his brash manner or the way he treated his underlings, but she couldn't argue with the results. Her rank had risen significantly since she had signed with Coach Ritton, and this year, they felt she had a good chance at the national championship.

"It's about time you showed up," Coach Ritton said by way of greeting as Kinsley came around the corner with her father and Amadeus in tow.

"We're here in plenty of time," Kinsley said with a forced smile. "I think there are still a couple riders ahead of me."

"Don't get cocky," Coach Ritton growled. He eyed Amadeus with a critical eye. "Did you warm him up properly?"

Kinsley kept her fake smile in place. "Of course. We did that not too long ago."

Coach Ritton glared at her and snorted, then turned his gaze back to the arena.

Kinsley joined him, watching the other competitors go through their routine. Finally, it was her turn. Turning to Amadeus, she nuzzled his face. "Ready, boy?" She giggled when the horse nibbled at her helmet. "All right. Let's show these people how wonderful you are."

At the end of the day, Kinsley sat on a hay bale just outside Amadeus's stall and removed her boots with a groan. She sucked in a short gasp when she noticed a couple specks of blood from where the new boots had worn on her skin for too many hours.

Garrett tsked his tongue and shook his head. "This can't continue," he said in a harsh whisper. "We're calling Quentin first thing in the morning."

Kinsley nodded mutely. Now that her mind wasn't on the competition, the burning and aching in her feet became overwhelming. *I'm ready to do anything if it means getting to the bottom of this mystery. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.*

SAWYER STOOD IN THE corner of the lobby, sipping his soda and watching the crowd mingle. They were celebrating the one-year anniversary of Lockwood Industries, which meant a party was in full swing. Tables laden with food stood in one corner while guests, employees, and investors mingled in the center.

Sawyer put his cup to his lips and eyed the group. Ridge was off to one side with his brand new wife, nuzzling her neck. Sawyer snorted. *Typical.* Roman had his arm around Rose's waist, and the large diamond on her finger sparkled in the sunlight. Their wedding was only a few weeks away.

Sawyer's eyes cut to Valentina and her new fiancé, Andrew. They were chatting with a large group of people, but their hands looked glued together,

as if they couldn't bear to be even the slightest bit separated from each other.

Sawyer sighed and shook his head. *It's like we're running a stinkin' dating service,* he mentally grumbled. *Three! Three of our employees hooking up within the first year of our opening. That has to be some kind of record.*

"Jealous?" Archer, one of the other employees, asked in his smooth baritone.

Sawyer raised a single eyebrow. "Are you kidding me? I'm way too young to settle down."

Archer chuckled and brought his root beer bottle to his lips. "That's what they all say," he teased with a grin.

Sawyer fought the desire to roll his eyes. Archer was a good guy, but Sawyer wasn't really in the mood to talk to anyone. Being surrounded by all the lovey-dovey couples was making his stomach churn, and he wanted nothing more than to escape and go pound a punching bag or something.

"You know what else they say?" Archer asked, slapping a hand on Sawyer's back.

"What's that?" Sawyer took the bait.

"Me thinketh you doth protest too much."

"What?" Sawyer made a face.

Archer laughed. "You spend far too much time complaining about the couples for you to not be next," Archer said with a smile. He winked as he walked away. "Beware of that next assignment. It might just be your last."

"Whatever," Sawyer muttered, taking another sip of his drink. "Military bro or not, next time I get Archer in the gym I'm gonna pound him."

Truth be told, Sawyer was in the mood to pound any of his military family, since they were the ones flaunting their relationships. Lockwood Industries might have been named after the Lockwood triplets, but it was run by a crew of people who had come together during their time on the battlefield.

Harlan, one of the triplets and Sawyer's brother, had been captured during a mission and spent several months as a prisoner of war. When Harlan was finally released, Sawyer and Ridge, the other two triplets, had left the military with their brother, determined to support him and help Harlan get back on his feet.

In a show of love and loyalty, three others they had served with joined their group as their contracts came due. Archer, Roman, and Valentina rounded out their motley crew of ex-military employees and helped make Lockwood Industries the success it was.

It had originally been Harlan's idea to start the company, and the others had jumped at the chance to support him. Harlan had changed during his imprisonment. He had always been a protector and responsible, but he'd lost the side of him that used to play and tease with his brothers. As identical triplets, they'd gotten into a lot of scrapes over the years, but those days were now long gone. Harlan rarely smiled and Sawyer often found a haunted look in his eyes when Harlan thought no one was paying attention.

Sawyer didn't know everything that had happened during Harlan's time as a prisoner, but seeing how Harlan had changed told Sawyer enough. As he thought of his brother, Sawyer's eyes drifted to where Harlan stood. His stoic face and focused gaze made Sawyer curious, so he followed Harlan's line of sight and sighed.

Cora, Lockwood Industries' secretary, was chatting and laughing with some past clients. Her red hair looked like burning flames in the sunlight shining through the large windows, and her wide smile was contagious. Sawyer's eyes went back to Harlan, and he watched his brother's hand tighten on his cup as Cora laughed heartily at someone's joke.

The whole office could tell that the two had feelings for each other, but Harlan refused to acknowledge any of it. Cora was so open and expressive, and her wide green eyes were almost always locked on her boss, but Harlan treated her as nothing more than an employee. In fact, sometimes he was harsher with her than anyone else. Sawyer suspected it was because Harlan was angry about his feelings toward the woman.

Cora was a close family friend, having grown up with Harlan and Sawyer's younger sister. Hiring her for the front desk position had been an easy, natural move, but the tension it was creating was becoming difficult.

"He needs to just kiss her and get it out of his system," Sawyer muttered.

"Who needs to kiss whom?" a deep, gravelly voice boomed from Sawyer's right.

Sawyer held back the urge to jump at the sound. *Some bodyguard you are,* he scolded himself. "Nothing," Sawyer said, turning with a smile and putting out his hand. "Just complaining to myself about all the lovebirds."

Quentin Gruffman laughed and shook the offered hand. “Don’t complain too hard, or you’ll find yourself next on the list.”

Sawyer shook his head. “Not me. I’m more of a short term kinda guy.”

Quentin’s large, beefy hand slapped Sawyer’s shoulder. “That’s what they all say,” he teased. “Until it’s too late.”

“Careful,” Sawyer said with raised eyebrows. “Willow might overhear you.”

Quentin shrugged. “She knows I’m wrapped around her little finger.”

Sawyer shook his head but smiled. “You enjoying the party?” He waved his hand around. “We wouldn’t be here without your help.” Quentin was the main investor in their firm, and Sawyer would forever be grateful for his help.

“It was a sound investment,” Quentin assured him. “Not to mention we love helping family.” Quentin’s younger brother had married the triplets’ sister and the whole Gruffman clan had adopted the Lockwood siblings.

Sawyer nodded.

“Speaking of which, I need your help,” Quentin continued.

Sawyer immediately straightened. “Is something wrong with Goldie?”

Quentin shook his head. “No. It’s a family friend.” He looked down at his cup of punch, then back up. “Do you know anything about horses?”

Sawyer frowned and shook his head. “Not really.”

“Ever heard of Kinsley Storm?”

Sawyer’s eyebrows shot up. An image of the gorgeous equestrian flashed through his mind. Sawyer might not follow horses, but anyone who watched the sports stations knew who Kinsley Storm was. She not only showed horses, she had a contract as a sports model as well. Her father had married a Brazilian beauty, leaving Kinsley looking like a Barbie doll. She was tall and in shape with a face like an angel. Sawyer gulped. “Uh, yeah. I’ve heard of her.” He tried to sound nonchalant, but wasn’t sure he succeeded when Quentin gave him an odd look.

Quentin huffed. “Well, she’s a good friend. Kind of like a sister, really, and she’s in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sawyer folded his arms and spread his legs, an old habit formed during his service.

Quentin’s eyes darted around. “Not here. But I’ve spoken with Harlan and we’re meeting tomorrow at two in his office. I’d like you to join us.”

“Okay...”

"We don't want to start any rumors, so everything is staying on the down low," Quentin explained.

"Got it." Sawyer nodded firmly.

Quentin nodded in turn. "I appreciate it." He once again slapped Sawyer on the back. "Gotta go mingle, but I'll plan on seeing you tomorrow."

"Sounds good." Sawyer watched as his friend walked away, his mind churning with possibilities. *Does this mean I get to meet Ms. Storm tomorrow? And what exactly does a horsewoman need from a security firm?* He took a deep breath. *I guess there's only one way to find out.*

CHAPTER 2

Kinsley stepped out of her car and squinted at the large concrete building in front of her. There was nothing decorative about it, no flashing signs or fancy artistry around the edges, but something about the large square with its huge windows looked strong and immovable. *Guess that goes right along with it being a personal security business,* Kinsley mused. She glanced over the top of the car to her dad, who was stepping out of the passenger seat.

He turned his head and raised his eyebrows. "You ready?"

Kinsley shrugged. "I guess so." She shut her door, pressed the lock button on her keys, and started walking. "How does Q know these guys again?"

"Remember Goldie? Finley's wife?" Garrett asked, referring to Quentin Gruffman's younger brother.

Kinsley nodded.

"Lockwood was her maiden name. The triplets running this are her brothers."

"Ah." Kinsley nodded. "That makes sense." She grabbed the long handle on the door and paused. "Q must trust them a lot, because he's not one to recommend people very often."

Garrett patted her shoulder as he walked through the door she held open. "I have no doubt they can take care of the situation. Quentin has far too much experience with security to not know exactly who we need."

Kinsley nodded again and they slipped inside. In the large, open foyer, a desk to the left waited for them. A petite redhead sat with her face staring into the screen of a computer. Kinsley and her father walked up and waited patiently for the secretary to notice them.

"Hello!" The woman turned and blinked. "Welcome to—" Her mouth opened and closed a few times before snapping shut with an audible click. "You're...you're Kinsley Storm," the woman said breathlessly.

Kinsley felt heat travel from her neck all the way up her cheeks. *Some days I am SO grateful to have darker skin*. "Yeah..." she answered with an

uncomfortable smile. Knowing the best thing to do was to face a fan head on, Kinsley extended her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

The secretary’s green eyes stayed wide as she took the offer and shook. Ever since Kinsley landed a modeling contract on the side of her riding, she’d had people start to recognize her in odd places. She’d been known around the horse world for several years, but outside of that circle, she used to be a nobody. Now, however, her face was plastered all over as she modeled athletic clothing, and people were taking notice.

“Sorry.” The secretary blinked several times and visibly pulled herself together. “You’re not the first celebrity to walk through those doors, yet here I am acting like a little kid on Christmas morning.”

Her wide smile helped ease some of the tension in Kinsley, and she found herself smiling back.

“By the way, I’m Cora.” She turned to Kinsley's father. “And you must be Mr. Storm.” Cora held out her hand, which Garrett took and gave a flirtatious kiss to.

“I’m always happy to meet a beautiful woman,” Garrett said with a grin.

Kinsley rolled her eyes. She knew full well her father wasn’t even close to wanting to replace his beloved wife, but you’d never know it by the charming act he put on in public.

Cora’s lips curled into a smile. “Ooh, I’m going to have to watch out for you. Handsome, older men are a weakness of mine.”

Garrett chuckled and put his hands in his pockets.

“Now... let’s get down to business.” Cora did a little typing on her computer, then glanced up. “You’re going to be meeting with Har— I mean, Mr. Lockwood in Conference Room number one.” She pushed back her seat and grabbed a file folder. “If you’ll just follow me, please.”

Kinsley raised an eyebrow and looked to her father at the secretary’s slip. Either she knew her boss very well, or she wanted to. *But which is it?* Kinsley wondered.

She followed the tiny woman down a long hallway to a door on their right. “The Storms are here,” Cora said politely as they walked inside. She held the door for Kinsley and her father to enter through, then stepped around them and set the file folder next to a blond-haired man who was seated at the head of the table. An exact replica of him was seated just to the man’s left.

The man in charge nodded his head, then stood, facing the Storms.

"You could at least say thank you," Cora muttered as she turned and strutted toward the door.

Kinsley bit her lip to keep from laughing as she watched the indignant secretary stomp out of the room, slamming the door behind her. The man at the head of the table looked livid while his double, who was still seated, had his hand over his mouth in obvious amusement.

"Forgive my secretary," the man said solemnly. He walked over and held out a hand. "I'm Harlan Lockwood, head of Lockwood Industries." His light blue eyes pierced through Kinsley, and she had to admit he was extremely handsome. *But there's something...sad about him,* she thought as she shook hands. *Wonder what happened.*

"Nothing to forgive," Garrett said jovially. "I was married for twenty years." He rocked back on his heels. "I've discovered when a woman's upset, she usually has good reason for it."

A snort came from the table, and Kinsley finally took the time to study the other man. Other than their haircuts, there was no way to tell him apart from Mr. Lockwood. *Well...haircuts and the sadness.*

Harlan waved a hand in the man's direction. "Let me introduce my brother, Sawyer Lockwood." Harlan began walking back to his seat. "Our other triplet, Ridge, won't be joining us. We felt it best to keep your situation as close to the vest as possible. Please, have a seat." He waved a hand at the table.

Kingsley's father put his hand on her back and guided her to the chair directly across from Sawyer Lockwood. "Thank you," she murmured to her dad as she sat down. When she brought her gaze up, she found herself looking directly into a set of cool, blue eyes. They were exactly the same shade as Harlan's, but something about this gaze made her breath hitch. She felt a strange flutter in her abdomen as they looked at each other. Before long, she felt that same heat from before creep up into her face, and she forced herself to look away. *There is no room for a handsome man in your life right now,* she chided herself. *You're aiming for nationals, not a boyfriend. Besides, you're here to hire protection, not get cozy with a man.*

SAWYER BLINKED SEVERAL times after their little staring contest was over. *What the heck was that?* When her hazel eyes had met his, he'd felt

trapped, as if some force was keeping them together. His skin had started to turn clammy and his heart rate had spiked. *Maybe I need to eat something…my blood sugar could be low.* Despite his little internal monologue, Sawyer knew that wasn't the problem.

When Kinsley Storm had walked through the door, he'd felt a distinct shift in the air. The woman was tall, nearly six feet, and she held herself with poise and confidence. Her lean muscles were easily visible in her cuffed jeans and T-shirt, and Sawyer could see exactly why people described her as an angel. *She's even prettier in person than she is in the magazines.*

He shook his head. *Get a grip! This is a client. A client you're going to be spending far too much time with over the next while. Remember, Harlan isn't running a matchmaking service.*

"So, Ms. Storm," Harlan began.

"Please," Kinsley interrupted, "call me Kinsley." She gave a small smile. "I'm much more comfortable being a little informal." She frowned a little. "If that's all right?"

Harlan gave her a nod and his version of a smile. "Whatever you want is fine." He glanced down at the file before looking back up.

"Sorry, I'm late!" Quentin Gruffman boomed from the doorway. He smiled wide and eased his large frame into the room, making it feel much smaller than it actually was.

Sawyer grinned and tipped his chin when Quentin caught his eye. It was amazing how easily the man moved. Sawyer himself was six-foot-four and built fairly wide, as were all three of the Lockwood brothers, but the Gruffmans put them to shame. *Well…at least two of them do.* Quentin and Finley Gruffman were a couple inches taller and wider than the Lockwoods, while the youngest, Brody, was about the same size. Knowing men who were bigger than them was a novel experience for the triplets. They'd always been the largest growing up, especially compared to their tiny mother and sister. Now, however, they had to give that honor to someone else. *At least we're all family, or honorary family anyway.* Sawyer held back a chuckle. *I'd hate to be on opposing sides to the Gruffmans.*

"We're glad you could make it, Quentin," Harlan said. "I was just about to ask Ms. Kinsley to tell us what's been going on."

Quentin sat down in a chair and put an ankle on the other knee. "Sounds good. Please, don't stop on my account."

Kinsley grinned at Quentin and reached out for a fist bump. “How’s it going, Q?”

Quentin smiled and complied with her greeting. “It’ll be better when we get you settled, Kins. I don’t like seeing family threatened.”

“So...how do you know each other?” Sawyer blurted out before he could think better of it.

All eyes turned toward him, but Sawyer held his ground. *In for a penny, in for a pound.*

“Mr. and Mrs. Storm were good friends with my parents,” Quentin explained easily. “So we grew up with little Kins here dogging our steps when we were boys.”

Sawyer raised an eyebrow when Kinsley rolled her eyes toward heaven.

“You mean, I kept you three out of trouble.”

Garrett Storm laughed. “I don’t think anyone was capable of that, love.”

Quentin laughed along with him and slapped Mr. Storm’s back. “True enough, Garrett. True enough.”

Harlan cleared his threat. “Well...” He looked around the table. “We ready to proceed?”

Sawyer folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in his seat with a nod. *So, she was raised rich. Huh. That explains the horses. It is a rich man’s sport, after all. And now she’s making money as a model.* He scowled internally. *Great. She’s probably going to be a spoiled princess to work with.*

“Ms. Kinsley, would you please tell us why you feel you need security?” Harlan asked, setting the conversation back on track.

Kinsley glanced at her father, then nodded. “We’ve had some...unusual things happen lately and we...my father and I, think that someone might be trying to sabotage me.”

Harlan was typing away on his laptop. “Can you tell us what’s been going on? The exact problems you’ve been having?”

Kinsley’s hands on the table began to twist together and Sawyer frowned. *Is it really that bad?*

“Well, they’ve been little things. First, my riding crop went missing.” She sighed and leaned back, putting her hands in her lap. “Initially, I thought I’d just misplaced it, but I’m super meticulous.” She shook her head. “And then we couldn’t find it anywhere. For me to misplace it was possible, although not likely, but for it to disappear altogether was weird.”

"Could it have been stolen?" Sawyer asked, his eyes narrowed as he watched her.

Kinsley nodded. "It's possible. There's security all around the barn, but we brushed that one off, assuming it probably was theft."

Harlan nodded his understanding and urged her to go on.

"After that, more things started to go missing. A brush, my gloves, a few more little things." She took a deep breath. "And then things changed. They started taking things that had the ability to mess up my show."

"Such as?" Harlan encouraged.

"My gloves were the first thing," Kinsley said with a shrug. "I know it sounds like a little thing, but gloves are worn in and are required in the show. I'd be disqualified without them."

"What did you do?" Sawyer asked, tilting his head to the side.

"I managed to borrow a pair from a friend, but they fit all wrong, which left me with sore fingers by the end of the day."

Sawyer grimaced. *Really? That's it? Gloves? It sounds to me like she's just messy.*

"Anything else?" Harlan asked, still typing away.

Kinsley nodded. "This last week, my boots went missing." She sighed. "Look, I know this probably sounds stupid from an outside perspective, but boots are similar to gloves. I happened to have a new pair with me and was able to use those, but my feet were really messed up by the end of the competition." Her serious gaze went from Harlan to Sawyer and back. "I don't think any of these things are a coincidence. Anyone within the horse world would know that gloves and boots are a big deal. By taking mine, they planned to put me in a position to either have to back out or to end up hurt by the end of the day, more than likely in an effort to mess up my performance."

Sawyer snorted before he could stop himself. Once again, all eyes were on him. He could feel the heat of embarrassment creeping up his neck, but he couldn't help but speak his mind. "It sounds to me like you need a housekeeper, not a bodyguard." He immediately regretted his words, but also had no desire to back down. Nothing she described sounded nefarious, and someone needed to say so.

CHAPTER 3

Kinsley snapped her falling jaw shut. *He doesn't even know me! How dare he accuse me of being a disorganized idiot! So much for thinking he and I had a moment earlier. He was probably sitting there thinking I looked like someone who needs a nanny*. She forced herself to stay calm when she spoke, but her clenched teeth easily gave away her anger. "I assure you, I meant what I said earlier, Mr. Lockwood. I'm a very organized individual. I didn't misplace that many items, and even if I did misplace one or two, I would have fixed the situation. But nothing I did stopped the disappearances. As for my boots and gloves, I triple check all my gear before leaving for a show." Her hands were now clenched in her lap and she forced her fingers to relax. The more she talked, the angrier she became.

"I've been doing this for years and wouldn't suddenly change my ways." She leaned onto the table. "I realize you're not a part of the horse world, Mr. Lockwood, but I can assure you that if I ran my career that way, I would have been out of the running many years ago."

Sawyer put his hands in the air in surrender. "Hold on, Ms. Kinsley. I wasn't trying to pick a fight."

Kinsley huffed and folded her arms over her chest. *Sure, you weren't*.

"I was simply trying to point out that nothing you've said sounds like real trouble. I'm struggling to understand why you feel you need protection."

Harlan cleared his throat and glared at his brother. "Thank you for your concern, Sawyer," he said firmly. "But I have to disagree." He turned to Kinsley and her father. "It sounds like the problems are escalating. They've gone from benign to physical harm, even if it is secondhand pain." Harlan pinched his lips for a moment. "Have you thought of putting up cameras in your storage area? Or wherever the problems have been occuring?"

Kinsley's dad jumped in. "It's not as easy as that. We're never in the same place. Each show takes place in different arenas around the country." He glanced at Kinsley and patted her knee. "Kinsley is running at the top of the charts this year and is expected to be a shoe-in for the nationals. Since

she's continued to perform well despite the problems, we're concerned the saboteur is going to start getting desperate. Knocking Kinsley out of the running would make big headlines in the horse community."

Harlan nodded thoughtfully. "These problems only happen at the shows?"

Kinsley nodded. "So far, yes."

"Do you think they might start showing up during your practices?" Harlan frowned.

Kinsley looked at her father, who smiled in encouragement, before she turned back to Harlan. "We think it has to be someone close to us causing all of this, so I guess it's possible."

"And what makes you think that?" Sawyer shot in.

Kinsley pushed her temper down and pinned the man with a hard stare. "Because security is tight. Some of those horses are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Strangers or people who look out of place would not be able to just waltz around the stables. You have to have badges and clearance to get anywhere. If someone is regularly getting into my tack, it has to be someone whom no one thinks anything of. They have to be someone who belongs."

"But that could be a competitor or any of the workers, correct?" Harlan asked, typing quickly into his computer again.

"Correct." Kinsley relaxed back into her seat. "I only have a small crew that I see in between shows. However, at a show, there are hundreds of people who could have access. The other riders, their crews, the parents, coaches, and helpers of those riders." She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "They'd all have badges and all have access." She looked up. "But in order to target me, it makes sense that they'd have to be somewhat familiar with me. They'd have to know where my stuff is and how to access it."

Harlan pursed his lips. "I'm going to need a list of everyone that works for you." He glanced at Sawyer. "And in the meantime, it sounds like you need someone behind the scenes with you at the shows."

Garrett grabbed his daughter's hand and squeezed. "That's what we were hoping for."

Harlan frowned. "How easy is it to get one of these badges? Can we just say that Sawyer is part of your crew?"

Kinsley's lips twitched and she fought the desire to laugh. "We could certainly sign him up as that." Her eyes met the somber bodyguard. "How good are you at mucking out stalls?"

Sawyer scowled. "Not a chance." He turned to his brother in protest. "I'm not going in there to wade up to my ankles in horse poop."

Kinsley couldn't help the giggle that slipped from between her lips at the thought of the large man working in the stalls. Her amusement, however, was drowned out by the loud guffaw coming from Quentin.

"I think I'd pay to see that," Quentin said with a wide smile.

Sawyer pointed a finger at Mr. Gruffman. "You first."

Quentin laughed louder. "I was raised with horses." He winked. "Been there and done that."

Sawyer shook his head and folded his arms over his chest. The move brought Kinsley's attention to his large biceps, and she found her mouth drying out at the thought of Sawyer Lockwood using a shovel. Those beautiful muscles would bunch and gleam as he hefted hay bales and...*Oh my gosh! Kinsley! Get a grip! You don't know him, and he's been nothing but a jerk since you arrived! No swooning over the Neanderthal.*

Harlan sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. "The only other story I can think of is you playing her boyfriend. If parents can attend, I would assume a significant other can as well."

"No!" Kinsley shouted, far too loudly. Every head in the room jerked toward her and she felt her cheeks begin to burn.

"Well, I guess that puts an end to that," Garrett whispered.

Kinsley didn't look at her father, but she could hear a hint of amusement in his voice. *Crud. Now he's going to think I'm hiding some weird attraction to the muscleman, when in reality I don't want the media to pick it up. Ugh. The mess that would cause would be of epic proportions.*

SAWYER FELT A TRICKLE of disappointment run down his spine at Kinsley's adamant answer, but he wasn't sure why. Playing the doting boyfriend to the horse princess wasn't exactly his idea of a good time. However, her immediate refusal stung his masculine pride, and before he could think better of it, he leaned forward. "You don't even know me," he said with a smirk. "I'd probably be the best boyfriend you've ever had."

Slowly, Ms. Storm raised a single eyebrow. She put her hands on the table and leaned forward to meet his aggressive stance. “Considering your behavior here, I think we both know that you’d be far from the best. I’ve never been one to enjoy know-it-all jerks who think the world revolves around them.”

A barking laugh came from down the table, quickly followed by a cleared throat, but Sawyer ignored it. “Well, I hate to break it to you, princess, but I’m not going to be mucking out stalls. If you want my help, you’re going to have to step down off your little pedestal long enough to slum it with the likes of me.”

Her eyes widened before she quickly regained control of her face. “I’m not a princess and I’ll thank you not to speak to me like that.”

Sawyer opened his mouth, but Harlan interrupted. “Sawyer. Stand down.” The command was so ingrained in Sawyer that he immediately snapped his jaw closed and sat back in his seat.

Sawyer looked to his brother, who appeared tired, and it immediately made Sawyer feel guilty for pushing the boundaries. *Geez, what am I doing? This woman is a client and I’m acting like a caveman*. He shook his head. “Sorry, Har.”

Harlan nodded his acceptance before turning to the Storms and Quentin. “I apologize that we got off on the wrong foot. I brought Sawyer in today because I felt he was the best man for the job. Despite the manners he’s been displaying, he really is good at digging to the bottom of a mystery and is definitely someone you want on your side if you’re fighting for your life.”

Kinsley gasped. “Do you think it will come to that?”

Sawyer noticed all the blood had drained from her face and he had to push back the desire to comfort her. He didn’t think this sounded like something that would threaten her life, but if they really were dealing with someone out to stop her, who knew how far the perp would go?

Harlan put up his hand reassuringly. “Obviously, we’re a long way from that kind of threat, but if the problems are getting worse, we can never be too careful.” He shut his laptop. “Now...if you’re still willing to give us a chance—”

Sawyer winced, knowing that any ill feelings were his fault.

“Then I think using Sawyer as a fake boyfriend is your best bet. It puts him on the ground with you, and he’ll have all the clearance he needs to keep an eye on things. It also means he can be close to you in case of any

type of danger. Nobody would think anything of a significant other following you around, but they might be suspicious of a stable boy at your side."

Sawyer watched Kinsley as she nodded stiffly. "I understand." It was easy to see from the clench of her jaw that she wasn't thrilled with the idea, but would go along with it.

Sawyer couldn't help but study her as they spoke. *It really shouldn't be that hard to be close to someone like her. She's stunning, but her personality is going to take some patience. Can I do my job if I'm constantly having to put out fires for a spoiled little girl?*

"Sawyer?"

Sawyer snapped his head around, his thoughts scattering as he realized Harlan had asked him a question. The back of his neck heated up and he refused to look at the rest of the table, knowing they had probably all caught him ogling Ms. Storm.

Harlan raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry. You'll have to repeat the question," Sawyer admitted.

Harlan's eyebrows slowly rose. "Do you think you can behave like a gentleman long enough to play the part of boyfriend while still scouting out who the saboteur is?"

"Of course," Sawyer assured him immediately. Inside he was dying. Sawyer hadn't been this embarrassed by his own behavior since he'd been caught in the closet with Missy Perkins his junior year in high school. *At least that embarrassment was tempered by a kiss.*

He forced his eyes not to travel to Kinsley's lips at the thought. He'd already noticed them, much to his own chagrin, and he had to admit to himself that if they ended up having to kiss, it definitely wouldn't be a hardship. He tried to play it cool. He'd been stupid enough for one day.

Harlan nodded and turned back to the group. "Good. Then it's settled. Kinsley, Sawyer, congrats on your relationship."

A small twitch pulled at the edge of Harlan's mouth and Sawyer realized his brother was enjoying his discomfort.

"Kinsley, I'm sorry to say it, but since you have a decent public persona, I think it might be best for the two of you to be seen in public." Harlan scrunched up his face. "I know we don't have a huge paparazzi scene around here, but if you went out to dinner at a high-end restaurant, it

should at least catch someone's eye. That way, when Sawyer starts showing up with you in the arena, it won't look like something happened suddenly."

Kinsley turned her stoic gaze to Sawyer. "If that's what we need to do."

Sawyer nodded curtly, determined to be professional about the situation. "I'll make reservations and pick you up on Friday at six."

"Can we please do six-thirty?" Kinsley asked, tilting her head to the side. "My lesson doesn't end until five-thirty and I doubt you want me smelling of horses when you're trying to eat."

Sawyer barely contained his surprise at her asking rather than demanding a different time. "If that's what works best."

Kinsley nodded. "Thank you." She stood. "Dad? You ready to go?"

Garrett Storm's eyes were dancing as he looked at Sawyer. "Sure thing, hon." He stood and put a hand on the small of her back, leading her out of the room.

Quentin stayed in his seat, his eyes narrowed at Sawyer. Once the Storms were gone, Sawyer turned to the large man and raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"I realize this is fake, but only a blind man would miss the spark between you two."

Sawyer started to protest, but Quentin put up a hand to stop him.

"Don't try to insult my intelligence. I'm around Goldie and Finley far too much to have you try and convince me otherwise. Your family seems to have a knack for creating fires."

Sawyer closed his mouth, but didn't speak. He knew there had been a spark, but Sawyer wasn't quite ready to admit it was a good spark. *I've never been drawn to spoiled women, and no matter how gorgeous she is, I'm not going to start now.*

"I just want you to know that Kinsley is like a little sister to me." Quentin leaned onto the table. "I expect nothing but the highest professionalism from you. I realize as her boyfriend, you'll have to be close, but please don't do anything stupid. I'd hate to tell my sister-in-law that I killed her brother."

Sawyer clenched his jaw to keep from giving a smart aleck response. Quentin was right. Any spark fanned right could burst to flame. "You have my word," he said stoically.

Quentin nodded. "Then I know it'll be done." He stood and walked to the head of the table. "Harlan...always a pleasure." He shook Harlan's hand

and nodded to Sawyer once more. “Have a good day, gentlemen.”

Sawyer relaxed a little after the man had left.

“Can you do it?”

Sawyer glanced sideways. “You doubt me?”

Harlan shrugged. “You’ve been extra uptight lately. I just don’t want to put you in a bad situation.”

Sawyer shook his head. “I’m good. We’ll get this figured out.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Harlan stood. “Thank you.” With that, he walked out the door, leaving Sawyer to his thoughts, which were much too full of a certain beautiful woman to be easy company.

CHAPTER 4

Kinsley looked at the mirror to touch up her lipstick as she waited for Sawyer to arrive for their date. Her nerves were twitching with excess energy and her heart felt like it couldn't keep a steady rhythm. Putting her hands down on the bathroom counter, she hung her head. "What is wrong with me?" she whispered. "I'm going on a fake date with a guy who's only here to protect me, and I'm acting like a teenage girl headed to senior prom!"

She glanced at her appearance, taking in the sleek dress and careful make-up. "You're not sixteen anymore, Kins," she said firmly. "You're a grown woman, and you are absolutely in complete control of yourself." Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she worked to center herself, just like she did before every competition.

She shoved her dancing nerves in a little box and locked it tight. She flexed her hands, working to rid them of the tension radiating through her body, and stretched her neck from side to side. After one more deep lungful, Kinsley blew out the air she held in a slow, steady manner.

"There." She nodded to herself. "Tonight is no big deal. Just act natural and it'll go off without a hitch." She pushed out a long breath as she walked to the front room of her house. "As long as Broody Britches doesn't pull out the jerk card."

Sawyer's comments about her needing a housekeeper still stung, and Kinsley was struggling to get rid of the snarky comebacks that she'd thought of since their meeting a few days ago.

She jerked when the doorbell sounded and put a hand over her heart. "Crud, that scared me." She let her breathing settle. "Here we go, I guess." Kinsley threw back her shoulders and stood straight as a poker as she walked over and threw open the door.

Every bit of confidence and calm she had mustered fizzled into nothingness as Sawyer's light blue eyes traveled from her head to her peep-toe shoes and back again.

"Hey," he said softly.

Kinsley fought the desire to put a hand on her fluttering belly. “Hey, yourself,” she said back. *Good one. Way to act like an adult.* Dressed in a dark button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, Sawyer looked absolutely delicious. His jeans were dark with just enough fading to be fashionable, and his curly hair fell lazily all over his head, just begging a woman to play with the curls.

Sawyer stepped back. “You ready to go?” He stuffed his hands in his pockets, showing off the muscles on the back of his large arms.

Geez. Why can’t he be as nice as he looks? There should definitely be a warning label for men who act one way but look another. “Sure.” Kinsley locked her door, then followed Sawyer to his car. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow as they arrived at a sleek luxury vehicle. “I wouldn’t have guessed this was yours. You look more like a monster truck kind of guy.”

Sawyer snorted and opened her door. He still hadn’t answered her by the time he walked around to the driver’s side, and Kinsley felt ridiculous. *Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut all night. Make him work for the conversation. Jerk.*

Sawyer got settled and pulled out of the parking lot. “Truth is, this isn’t mine. Quentin loaned it to me.”

Some of Kinsley’s embarrassment faded as he began talking. “Q loaned it to you? Why?”

Sawyer kept his eyes on the road while he spoke. “My...monster truck isn’t exactly the picture we’re trying to send the media, now is it?”

Aaaannnnd, he’s back. Kinsley hadn’t even considered what kind of picture they were trying to create, other than one where they were together. “I guess not,” she said softly.

“If I’m dating a princess, I need to act the part of prince,” Sawyer said with a smirk in her direction.

Kinsley’s temper flared immediately. “I am *not* a princess, so please stop calling me that. There’s no way I’m going through with this...whatever this *thing* is between us, with you being horrible the whole time, so just...grow up!”

Sawyer’s jaw tightened and Kinsley could see a muscle twitching near his temple. *Good. Let him stew a bit. I haven’t done anything to aggravate him, yet he’s insulting me left and right.*

“First off, let’s get something straight,” Sawyer said in a tight voice. “There is no *thing* between us. This is all play-acting, and when this case is

over, I'll be running for the hills, so don't be letting your heart get involved."

Kinsley's jaw dropped at his audacity, but he wasn't done.

"Secondly, you're a pretty, little rich girl, who's had everything handed to you on a silver platter, so don't deny the fact that you're a princess." He glanced at her sideways before going back to the road. "Some of us have actually had to work for a living instead of playing with horses and getting our picture taken."

"Turn the car around," Kinsley said through gritted teeth. Her hands were in tight fists and she could actually feel her short fingernails digging into her palms, but she ignored the pinch.

"Excuse me?" Sawyer asked.

"I said...Turn. The. Car. Around."

"We have a reservation," Sawyer argued, not changing direction at all.

"I don't care," Kinsley spat. "You have done nothing but insult me ever since you met me." She was seething inside and her voice rose in her anger. "You have no idea what my life has been like. All you're seeing is the package that's displayed to the public, and if you're dumb enough to think that's all there is to me, then I definitely don't think you're smart enough to catch whoever is causing me problems."

Sawyer's face turned red and he turned on a blinker. Turning onto a side street, he pulled over and put the car in park, then shifted in his seat, one arm on the steering wheel so he could face Kinsley head on. "You have no idea what I'm capable of," he ground out.

"Exactly!" Kinsley said, throwing her arms in the air. "You don't know what I'm capable of either. You don't rise to the top of anything without dedication and hard work, both of which I have given in spades as a horsewoman and model." She pointed a finger at him. "You have no right to judge me. We came to your firm because Quentin is a trusted family friend, and he said you were the best. However, all I'm seeing at the moment is a bratty kid who's wasting time insulting his client instead of trying to solve the problem. It seems to me my father and I would be better off with a different firm."

Sawyer continued to glare at her, but didn't respond. His breaths were heavy, his chest moving rapidly up and down.

Not that I would notice his chest, Kinsley assured herself. *Nope. I'm definitely not noticing how he fills out that shirt or how hard his muscles*

look.

Finally, Sawyer nodded firmly. "Fair enough. How about we make a deal?"

Kinsley narrowed her eyes. "What kind of deal?"

"I'll lay off with the princess comments and you agree not to fire us. If we're going to pretend to date, we're going to have to get to know each other well enough to convince people it's real." He took a deep breath, filling that marvelous chest again. "I'll try to be open-minded if you'll be the same."

Kinsley tilted her head. "I can agree to that, but if you so much as hint that I'm a spoiled brat again, I'll be gone."

Sawyer nodded and held out his hand, which Kinsley took. She jerked a little when their palms met, as warmth cascaded up her arm and straight into her upper body. *Heaven help me*.

SAWYER DID HIS BEST not to react to the odd, but far from unpleasant sensation that ran through him when he and Kinsley shook on the deal. Keeping his face emotionless, he turned back in his seat and restarted the car. The engine purred to life and Sawyer nearly purred with it. He was loving driving this thing and was going to have a hard time giving it back when the case was over.

He held in a snort. *When this case is over. Stupid! It was nearly over right now! How would that look for Harlan's business if you drove off a client because you can't control your attraction to her? This firm is the best thing that's happened to Harlan since he got home, and you almost blew it*.

He subtly shook his head. Kinsley Storm was messing with his mind. Starting with the fact that he didn't think she needed protection. However, once he added in the fact that she was stunningly gorgeous and he had to get close to her in order to do his job? Sawyer felt as if his foundation was completely gone.

When she'd opened her door, Sawyer had nearly swallowed his tongue. Her trim legs looked like they were a mile long even though her dress came to just above her knee caps. It hugged her slim, tall body and definitely let anyone know that she was all woman. Her dark hair was a flowing river and her red lipstick made her mouth look like a ripe cherry. Most men would

have been ecstatic for the chance, even the fake chance, to go on a date with Kinsley Storm. However, the only thing Sawyer could think of was how their firm had turned into some kind of matchmaking service, and he wanted no part of it.

So...he'd done the only thing he could think of to preserve his manhood. He'd insulted her to make sure there was no chance the two of them would ever get close. Only it wasn't working the way he wanted. Kinsley wasn't a quiet dormouse who would simply turn up her nose and give him the silent treatment. No, she was proving to be much more willing to call out his idiocy.

And it definitely was idiocy. No one is going to believe we're dating if I keep driving her away. She's right. I need to grow up and act like a professional instead of a teenager with no self-discipline. He ground his teeth.

"Are we going to get to know each other? Or simply sit in brooding silence?" Kinsley broke into the thick tension in the car and Sawyer snapped out of his mental wanderings.

"Uh...I suppose we should know a few basics heading into the restaurant, right?" He glanced at her. "What's your full name?"

A small grin tugged at the edge of those marvelous lips and Sawyer gripped the steering wheel harder. "Kinsley Storm."

His eyebrows shot up. "What? No middle name?"

She shook her head.

"Huh." Sawyer stewed on that for a moment.

"Do you?"

He turned toward her for a split second, then back to the road. "What? Have a middle name?"

Kinsley gave him a look of 'duh'.

Sawyer couldn't help the chuckle that emerged. "Uh, yeah. I do."

There was a second of silence. "And?" she prompted.

He sighed. *I started it. Guess I should finish it*. "Damien. Sawyer Damien Lockwood."

Kinsley pursed her lips and slowly nodded. "Nice. It sounds very masculine, which is obviously a good fit." She waved a hand in his direction and Sawyer had to fight the temptation to puff up at her compliment.

"Thanks," he muttered. "How old are you?"

Kinsley gasped and put a hand over her chest. “What? Didn’t you know asking a woman her age is a cardinal sin, Mr. Lockwood?” She was speaking in a heavily sarcastic, fake Southern accent. “We ladies do *not* answer to such a lack of manners.”

Sawyer gave her a look. “Considering I think it’s something a boyfriend would know about a girlfriend, you’re going to have to get over your Southern indignation.” He raised an eyebrow as he pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. “Especially since you aren’t Southern.”

Kinsley’s answering laughter floated through the car, and much to Sawyer’s surprise, it lifted some of the tension running through him. His chest loosened and he felt like he could breathe easier than he had since he had picked her up.

“I’m twenty-five,” she finally admitted. “How about you?”

Shoot. She’s young. “Thirty-two,” Sawyer shot out before stepping out of the car and closing the door. He didn’t want to hear anything she had to say about how old he was. He could already feel it every morning when he pushed himself out of bed.

Following his role, Sawyer walked around and opened Kinsley’s door. He offered his hand, which she took, her long legs coming out first to land on the sidewalk. Sawyer tugged on his suddenly tight collar as they headed toward the restaurant. *Control. You’re in complete control,* he assured himself. *And holding her hand is part of the act. It has nothing to do with her soft skin or how perfectly her fingers fit with yours. She’s a client and you’re her pretend boyfriend.*

Sawyer kept his lecture running as they went inside and were seated at their table. He could feel the patrons’ eyes on them as he held out Kinsley’s chair for her.

“Thank you,” she murmured politely.

Sawyer walked around and took his own seat, lifting the menu and glancing at the entrees. He whistled low in his mind. *Good thing this is on the company tab. Restaurants like this are definitely not in my budget.* He glanced at Kinsley as she studied the options. *She’s probably not even looking at the prices. I’ll bet she’s eaten at a ton of places just like this.*

Shoving his resentment to the side, Sawyer forced himself to focus back on the task at hand. After their meals were ordered, he leaned his folded arms onto the table. “So...” He toyed with his water goblet.

Kinsley smiled and leaned closer. “We’re quite the spectacle, right?”

Sawyer's eyes darted around and he had to agree. "I guess seeing the famous Kinsley Storm with some nobody is enough to pique anyone's attention."

Kinsley reached tentatively and touched his forearm. "Just because your face isn't plastered on a billboard doesn't mean you're a nobody," she said softly. "Serving our country and keeping people safe is far more noble than what I do."

When she began to remove her hand, Sawyer quickly covered it with his own. *You're playing with fire,* he warned himself, but the words went unheeded. "Somebody has to do it," he said just as softly.

She smiled shyly. "Well...I'm glad it's you."

Sawyer forced himself to smile back before he nodded his thanks. He wasn't expecting such a nice compliment from her. His perception of her princess status began to look shaky. *Is it possible...is it possible I was wrong about her?*

As a tingly warmth spread up his arm from where they were touching, Sawyer had to admit he was in trouble whether he was wrong about her or not.

CHAPTER 5

"Get your head in the game!" Coach Ritton shouted from the sidelines as Kinsley trotted Amadeus around the ring.

She clenched her jaw and nodded, doubling her efforts to focus. Ever since her date a couple nights ago, Kinsley was having a terrible time keeping herself on task. The night started out as a nightmare. Sawyer had been rude, just as when they'd first met, and made presumptions about her that had no basis in fact.

However, after they came to a truce, Kinsley had to admit the evening had been rather pleasant. She couldn't categorize it as the best date she'd ever had, but it definitely wasn't the worst. What made it stand out was the physical reaction she had to Sawyer every time they were close. She warmed whenever he was near, whether they were touching or not. When he would grab her hand, butterflies erupted in her stomach. Her nerve endings seemed completely tuned into him and any skin-on-skin contact would cause sparks to explode through her limbs.

She'd never felt that with any other man before and wasn't entirely excited it was happening now. Not only was it a terrible distraction, but Kinsley wasn't sure she even liked Sawyer. *Even though we called a truce, the fact of the matter is, he's still a jerk.*

"Down! DOWN!" her coach shouted from the edge of the arena. "Put your heels down!" He growled and threw his hands up.

Kinsley couldn't hear what he said next, but it sent Tyrone scrambling out of his seat and rushing back to the stables.

Guess I'm destined to be surrounded by jerks, Kinsley thought as she watched her friend hurry from the area. She sighed and pulled Amadeus to a halt. "Sorry, boy," she murmured. "I'm a bit distracted today." She leaned forward and rubbed a hand on his neck.

Amadeus nickered and bobbed his head.

Kinsley chuckled. "Good to know you forgive me. Now, if only I felt sure Coach Ritton would do the same."

"Have you decided to become a professional daydreamer?" Coach snarled as he stormed over to her.

"Sorry, Coach." Kinsley put on the best smile she could. "I'm having trouble concentrating today. But I'll do better, I promise."

He shook his head in disgust. "You'll never win nationals with that kind of work ethic. Amadeus can't do it himself. He needs guidance and a strong hand."

Kinsley worked hard to keep her smile from drooping. *Remember, you pay him for this because he's the best,* she reminded herself. *Listen and learn. Listen and learn.* "Got it." Kinsley nodded.

"Back to the beginning," he grumbled. "Watch how you hold those reins and keep a steady pace. This isn't some pony ride at the fair."

Kinsley held in the eye roll wanting to break free and again nodded. Touching her heels to Amadeus's side, she pulled him to the left and headed back to the front of the arena. "All right, boy," she murmured as they trotted back. "Time to put on our best. I can let my mind mull over the handsome but rude Sawyer Lockwood later."

Amadeus snorted and turned himself as they got to the right part of the ring.

"Here we go," Kinsley breathed. Taking a deep, deliberate breath, she pushed back her wandering thoughts and dug deep in order to put her mind where it belonged.

A couple of hours later, she slid from the saddle with a groan. "Ooohh...I'm gonna feel that tomorrow," she grumbled into Amadeus's neck. She rubbed her lower back and stretched her legs. The inside of her thighs were trembling and her backside had thankfully gone numb.

"Tomorrow, ten sharp," Coach Ritton called from the other side of the ring. He spun on his heel and stomped away, shouting orders to the workers in the area, who all jumped to do his bidding.

"Geez," Kinsley said through gritted teeth. "That man is crazy."

"My thoughts exactly," a deep voice said from behind her.

Kinsley squealed, causing Amadeus to jerk. "Sawyer!" She put her hand on her chest. "Oh my gosh. Don't do that!" She patted Amadeus for reassurance. "Coming up behind a horse could get you killed."

Sawyer raised his eyebrows and glanced at the quiet stallion. "I didn't come up behind." He made a face. "Believe it or not, I'm not as stupid as I look."

"You don't look stupid," Kinsley quickly said, only to want to slap her forehead. *Why the heck did I say that? I might as well wear a neon sign that says 'Hey, Sawyer! I think you're attractive!'*

Sawyer chuckled. "Good to know." He eyed Amadeus. "So this is your horse?"

Kinsley couldn't help the wide smile that spread across her face. She stepped up and wrapped her arms around Amadeus. "Yep. He's my favorite boy." She brought their foreheads together. "Aren't you, Addy?"

Sawyer wrinkled his nose. "Addy?"

"Short for his name, Amadeus."

"O-kay." Sawyer held the word longer than normal.

She rolled her eyes. "Non-horse people," she grumbled good-naturedly. "You'll never understand the bond."

Sawyer stuffed his hands in his jean pockets and shrugged. "To each their own, I guess." His eyes wandered around the arena.

"So...not that I mind, but what are you doing here?" Kinsley finally asked.

Sawyer didn't answer for a moment as he continued to survey the scene. Once he seemed satisfied, he stepped up close. "One, I thought it would look better if your boyfriend was around once in awhile."

A lump of concrete slammed into Kinsley's stomach. *Fake. Remember, Kins. This is all fake, no matter what he does to your headspace.*

"And two, I thought you could show me around, so I could get a feel for how a place like this is laid out. Maybe even do a little investigating."

Kinsley nodded, pushing her disappointment aside. "Of course. I need to take Amadeus back to his stall and put him away. You can come with me." Kinsley turned and grabbed the horse's reins, leading him out of the arena and down toward the stables.

She did her best to not pay attention to the overpowering presence of Sawyer, but she seemed to lose all sense of self-control when she was with him. *Good thing he doesn't feel the same, or this situation would be a lot harder.*

SAWYER WALKED JUST to the side of Kinsley, slightly wary of the very large animal to her right. As far as horses went, Sawyer had to admit the

animal was magnificent. Dark and shiny, strong and muscular. It was easy to see why anyone would be drawn to him, but Sawyer was unfamiliar with horses, and he didn't trust the large beast not to kick him in the head.

Kinsley looked over her shoulder. "He doesn't bite, you know," she teased.

Sawyer shoved away the warm fuzzies that tried to form at her sweet smile. "That you know of."

Kinsley laughed and led them toward the opening of the barn. "Addy is just a big baby. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

Sawyer raised his eyebrows just as the horse swatted at something with his tail.

Kinsley noticed the movement and shrugged with a sheepish grin. "Okay, maybe flies are bad news, but he likes people." She took the horse to a stall and stepped inside, turning Amadeus around so he faced the hallway. "Ever been in a horse barn before?" she asked as she began to unbuckle the harness.

"Uh...nope." Sawyer looked around, noticing a few workers scattered around, doing various jobs. "Don't you have a worker who does that kind of stuff for you?" he asked without thinking about how his words sounded.

Kinsley's face went stony, and Sawyer immediately regretted his question.

He rubbed his hands down his face. "Sorry. I promised a truce, and I didn't mean to break it." He sighed. "I'm just...surprised," he admitted, waving an arm in her direction. "I had you pegged as someone who would drop your horse off and walk away without ever getting your hands dirty."

Kinsley raised a challenging eyebrow. "Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I've done everything from washing Amadeus to mucking out his stall. He's my horse, and I take care of him." She slammed the halter down in the side of the stall and marched over, resting her folded arms on top of the gate. "You could try to get to know me instead of making judgments, you know. I would think someone in your line of work would know from experience that not everything is what it seems."

Sawyer felt his cheeks flush, and he had to nod. *I have absolutely no control when I'm around this woman. If I'm not careful, she's gonna go somewhere else and I'll have cost Harlan a good job. Get it together!* "You're right. I'm sorry. Again. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Can we start again?"

Kinsley relaxed. “Does that mean our date the other night didn’t count? Because we started over then, too.”

Sawyer chuckled. “Yeah, I guess we shouldn’t throw away that progress, huh?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “How about we just pretend I’m not such a jerk and move on?”

She paused and straightened from her work. “Would you like to come in and help me, then?” she asked softly. “I’ll show you the ropes, so to speak.” She chewed on her lip and Sawyer’s eyes immediately went to the movement.

He groaned internally. *Is she trying to kill me? I’ve never in my life been interested in anything to do with horses, and now I find myself wanting to let her teach me everything about them*. “Uh...”

“Hey, Kins!”

Sawyer jerked toward the sound, frowning when he saw a man approaching the pen.

“Hey, Tyrone!” Kinsley answered back just as enthusiastically. She raised up on her tiptoes, glancing down the walkway. “You been working?”

Tyrone flushed a deep red and nodded. Sawyer’s frown deepened. *Who’s this guy?*

“Hey, Ty, let me introduce...” Kinsley paused for a second before finishing, “Sawyer Lockwood. My b-boyfriend.” She stumbled slightly over the word, but Sawyer found himself proud she said it nonetheless.

Tyrone’s eyes widened and he backed up a little when he looked at Sawyer.

That’s right, buddy. Might as well get that little crush out of your system. Kinsley is taken. He slapped himself mentally. *What has gotten into you? You and Kinsley are not together! It’s fake! Keep it that way!*

“Tyrone is one of the stable hands,” Kinsley explained with an indulgent smile. “He helps keep the place shipshape.”

Sawyer tilted his chin up in greeting, then offered his hand, forcing a pleasant smile for the worker. “Nice to meet you, man.”

Tyrone eyed Sawyer’s hand like it held a dozen diseases before giving a quick head nod in return. “Nice to meet you, too.” He turned to Kinsley. “I didn’t know you were...dating anyone.”

Kinsley shrank back a little. “Well...it’s all fairly new.”

Sawyer let his hand drop to his side as he studied the young man further. He appeared to be out of high school, but still a little younger than Kinsley.

The fact that he obviously had a crush on her automatically put him on Sawyer's suspect list. Add to that the fact that he had access to everything in the barn, and Sawyer was even more curious.

Tyrone's nose scrunched up. "Is he," he tilted his head toward Sawyer, "gonna be around all the time now?"

Sawyer raised an eyebrow as Kinsley stuttered.

"Ty! That wasn't...I mean..."

"Sure does," Sawyer interrupted, stepping closer to the gate. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned back so he was close to Kinsley. "I love to watch Kinsley in her element. That means I'll be around a lot."

Tyrone's eyes narrowed and Sawyer puffed out his chest a little. "Don't you have a job or anything?" Tyrone asked with a sarcastic hint in his voice. "Or are you just freeloading from Ms. Storm here?"

Sawyer ignored Kinsley's gasp and straightened to his full height, which was several inches taller than the small stablehand. Stepping away from the gate, he stood right in front of the other man, purposefully tightening his muscles to be as intimidating as possible. "I work freelance, which allows my schedule to be flexible." He smirked. "Very flexible. I have every intention of being here for anything Kinsley needs me for."

Tyrone swallowed hard and he backed up. Dropping Sawyer's gaze, he looked over at Kinsley and smiled shakily. "You looked great out there today." His eyes darted to Sawyer, then back. "I have work to do, so I'll leave you alone with your...friend."

Sawyer watched Tyrone go, not moving until the boy had disappeared into a stall. Once he felt it was safe to do so, Sawyer turned and walked over to Kinsley, who looked furious. *Here we go,* Sawyer thought with a groan. *Girls just don't get it*.

CHAPTER 6

"What the heck was that?" Kinsley hissed, glaring at the strutting peacock coming her way.

"That was me scaring off your little fan club," Sawyer said, leaning over the gate.

"Fan club?" Kinsley scoffed. "Tyrone has worked for Coach Ritton for years. He's super sweet, and he takes a lot of guff from rude, domineering people with a smile on his face." She shook her head. "He doesn't need that from you."

Sawyer leaned in closer. "The guy is already on my suspect list, and now you're giving me more reason to have him followed."

"Are you kidding?" Kinsley felt her eyes widen and her jaw flop open. "How in the world can he be a suspect?"

Sawyer glanced down the hallway, then slipped inside the gate, crowding Kinsley's space. She backed up and Sawyer followed, pinning her in the corner, his hands on the barn wall on either side of her.

Sawyer brought his head down to hers and put his lips right by her ear. A shiver ran down her spine and Kinsley had to lock her knees. *Now is NOT the time to swoon!*

"Keep your voice down," Sawyer whispered against her ear. "People keep glancing down at us. We need to look the part of a couple."

Kinsley pulled back a little so she could look him in the eye. Being this near to him was messing with her equilibrium, and she was struggling to make a coherent sentence. "Right now, I don't really care about how we look. You hurt one of my friends and I'm not okay with that."

Sawyer sighed and ran one of his hands through his curls, leaving them in delicious disarray and Kinsley's fingers twitching with the desire to do the same. "Look, I'll try to be nice, but he was doing his best to put a wedge between us, and I had to lay down the law."

Kinsley shook her head to get rid of her hair-touching fantasies and frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Footsteps could be heard on the concrete walkway, heading toward their stall, and Sawyer stiffened. His eyes met hers and Kinsley immediately knew she was in a lot of trouble.

"Guess we're jumping into the deep end with this one," he murmured before his mouth came firmly down on hers.

A very small part of Kinsley's brain wanted to protest. It wanted to beat against Sawyer's broad, firm chest. It wanted to demand an explanation. However, the other part, the obviously larger part, brought her arms up around his neck and hung on for dear life.

Everything around Kinsley seemed to disappear as Sawyer's lips played with her own. The smell, sounds, and distractions of the barn were gone, and only the fire and contentment shooting through her veins seemed to exist. Her fingers toyed with the hair on the back of Sawyer's neck, and when his arms tightened around her and he tilted his head for a deeper kiss, Kinsley was sure she had died and gone to heaven.

It wasn't until Amadeus snorted and shifted his weight into Kinsley's shoulder that she was brought out of her kiss-induced haze. Wrenching her mouth away from paradise, she gasped in a large breath and pushed against Sawyer. "Stop," she said hoarsely.

Sawyer pulled back, his eyes wide, and panicked as they darted around the space.

Kinsley's anger immediately dissipated and she grew concerned. "Sawyer? Are you okay?"

Sawyer's eyes finally met hers. "I didn't...I shouldn't have..." He blew a strong breath out his lips and brought his forehead down to hers as he deflated. "Sorry, Kins."

Kinsley sucked in a silent gasp at the use of her nickname. It felt all too perfect coming from his mouth.

"I didn't mean to take it that far," he said quietly. "We needed to make it look good for whoever was passing, but I got..." He cleared his throat. "I got carried away, I guess."

Kinsley stamped down the flutters of excitement that filled her belly at his words. "Well, they're gone now, and we still need to discuss your behavior with Tyrone."

"Yeah." Sawyer stood up straight and backed out of Kinsley's personal space. "But I'm not changing my mind about him being a suspect."

Kinsley threw up her hands. "Tyrone is *not* a suspect."

Sawyer's emotion disappeared and his face went stoic.

"I'm serious, Sawyer. That man is a saint. You leave him alone."

"I can't do that, Kinsley." Sawyer shook his head slightly. "He was obviously upset at me being here, and has a crush on you. That puts him at the top of the list."

"How could having a..." Kinsley looked over Sawyer's shoulder to make sure no one was listening. "How could having a crush make him a suspect? This place is full of attractive women. he could have a crush on any number of them."

"Yeah, but how many of them are kind to Tyrone?" Sawyer raised an eyebrow.

Kinsley snapped her mouth shut, knowing that a lot of the wealthy owners didn't even give the poor kid a second look. "Still doesn't make him a suspect," she muttered. "Why would he hurt the person he liked?"

"You ever heard of hero syndrome?"

Kinsley frowned and shook her head. When Amadeus shifted again and blew out a breath, she glanced over and realized his saddle was still on and he hadn't been brushed down. "Ah, crud." She stepped around Sawyer. "I'm sorry, handsome," she cooed, quickly removing all the gear from the horse.

"No worries," Sawyer said with a crooked grin.

Kinsley rolled her eyes. "You know full well I wasn't speaking to you."

Sawyer shrugged and leaned one shoulder against the side of the stall. "So you say."

Kinsley shook her head, but couldn't help the small grin tugging at her lips. "Don't listen to him," she whispered to Amadeus, who nodded and snorted in return. "He's just jealous."

This time it was Sawyer who snorted. "That'll be the day," he grumbled under his breath.

Ha! Finally! Score one for Kinsley. She grinned as she picked up a brush and began to scrub Amadeus' sweaty back.

JEALOUS OF A HORSE. I'm jealous of a horse. Sawyer fought the desire to roll his eyes at his own behavior. First, he got completely lost in that

amazing kiss, and now he was wishing he was a horse. *What the heck is happening to me?*

"I'm still waiting," Kinsley said over her shoulder as she worked.

"For?" Sawyer raised his eyebrows.

"For what hero syndrome is."

"Oh." Sawyer stood from his spot on the wall and carefully edged closer to Kinsley so he could keep his voice low. "Hero syndrome is where someone has an uncontrollable urge to be a savior. They want recognition, to actually *be* the hero. A lot of times, they'll secretly create a situation that they can come in and solve."

Kinsley paused and turned back toward Sawyer. "So you think he's doing things to me so he can come in and be my hero?"

Sawyer shrugged. "I'm not saying he's doing anything. I'm just saying it's a possibility, and I plan to keep an eye on him. He obviously wants your attention. Maybe this is his way of getting it."

Kinsley shook her head, sadness easily read on her face. "I understand what you're saying, but I just don't see it. What you're describing sounds like someone who is mentally ill, and Tyrone is a little awkward, but nothing else is wrong with him."

Sawyer pointed a finger at her. "That you know of."

Her shoulders dropped, and Sawyer felt terrible for opening her eyes to a side of the world she'd obviously never experienced before. *This is exactly what makes her a princess. She grew up in a bubble, never needing or wanting anything. It's a far cry from where my life has gone.* In the military, he'd been exposed to the worst of humanity, and it made it difficult to have any faith in humankind. He'd met people along the way who were good people, but even in this line of work, he saw far too much of the unsavory.

"I see your point," she whispered, her eyes on the ground. When she looked up, the unshed tears swimming in her gaze made Sawyer feel like a jerk. "But please, be careful with him. Coach Ritton, who runs things around here, is terrible to work with. He's a bully to the full definition and he treats Tyrone worse than anyone else." Kinsley stepped over and put a hand on Sawyer's forearm. "Please, promise me you won't hurt him. He doesn't need one more man breathing down his neck."

Sawyer's tongue wouldn't work for a minute. The heat radiating from her hand seemed to have paralyzed his body, and he was struggling to

remember what she was asking him. He cleared his throat and backed away from her touch. He nearly cursed when he saw the crestfallen expression on her face at his rejection. “I’ll do my best to be discreet and not put any undue pressure on him.”

Kinsley’s smile was obviously forced, but she straightened her shoulders and nodded. “Thank you.”

As she went back to taking care of Amadeus, Sawyer blew out a long breath. *I can’t get too close to her. I will NOT fall for my client the way everyone else has. I’m here to protect, not settle down, and her touching me is just too much. We’re going to have to keep the touching restricted to only when necessary.* His mind drifted back to their kiss and the overwhelming satisfaction it gave him. *Because obviously I can’t be trusted around this woman... at all.*

“I’m gonna take a little walk around the barn,” Sawyer said, stepping toward the gate.

Kinsley looked over in surprise. “You don’t want to wait for a tour?”

He shook his head. *Nope. I need some space to get my self-control back together.* “I’d rather wander. Sometimes I can see things better if I’m not running someone else’s schedule.”

“Okay.” She gave him a small wave. “I’ll see you later, then.”

Sawyer nodded. He glanced up and down the walkway, noting the people in his vision. He then leaned back over the gate. “Be sure to let me know if anything else happens.”

Kinsley nodded but didn’t verbally respond, and Sawyer took off in the same direction Tyrone had. *There’s probably an office or something down this way. That might be a good place to start.*

Holding his head high like he belonged, Sawyer worked his way down the massive barn. Most of the stalls to the right and left of him were filled with horses. Their stomping and snorting made them difficult to ignore, and Sawyer nearly jumped out of his skin when one sneezed.

Geez...chill, he reminded himself. *These are well-trained animals. They won’t hurt you.*

A shout from outside caught his attention and Sawyer moved quickly in order to see the problem. When he finally got to a window, an older man, holding an antsy horse in one hand, was bellowing at someone that was out of Sawyer’s vision. Curious as to what had happened, Sawyer looked around to discover an outside entrance, then rushed through it.

Turning left toward the spectacle, he slowed at the corner and leaned around just enough to see what was going on.

"You never learn," the older man growled. "I took you on as a favor to your mother, and I've regretted it every day since."

Sawyer's eyes widened when he realized Tyrone was the one being yelled at. The young man's head hung low and his shoulders were hunched. He was the epitome of a victim. Sawyer nearly growled himself as he listened to the older man continue to berate the stable worker. *That has to be Coach Ritton. Kinsley said he was a bully. No wonder she wants me to go easy on Tyrone.*

He ground his teeth, hating the way the older man put down the younger one. Knowing there was nothing Sawyer could do at this point in time, he slipped back into the barn, mentally adding Coach Ritton to his list of suspects.

But what would be his motives? Sawyer scrunched his nose as he walked around examining everything. *Why would a coach sabotage his own protegé?* It didn't make any sense, but if anyone had a villainous personality, it was definitely the coach.

Sawyer sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. "Guess I'll just have to keep digging," he murmured. "We've got a show in a few days. Hopefully, something will come up then."

CHAPTER 7

Kinsley murmured to herself as she triple-checked all her gear. They were leaving for a show in the morning and she was determined that this one would go smoother than the last couple. Despite the fact that she and her father had brought in their own security, she was starting to have second thoughts.

Absolutely nothing untoward had happened during the last two weeks, and she was sure Sawyer was getting annoyed. He'd been around the barn nearly every day and the staff was starting to know him by name.

Especially the women, Kinsley growled in her mind. Her teeth clenched as she locked the tack box. Once the other women had taken a look at the handsome bodyguard, they'd swarmed like bees on honey. Not a single one had cared that Sawyer and Kinsley were dating. *I mean, fake dating,* Kinsley reminded herself. "But they don't know that," she grumbled.

"Talking to yourself again?" a snarky voice came from behind Kinsley and she spun.

"Mary Ann," Kinsley said, forcing a cheery tone into her voice. "How are you today?"

Mary Ann raised an imperial eyebrow and cocked her hip. "Just what were you grumbling about?"

Kinsley kept the smile in place despite the fact that it felt brittle. "If I wanted anyone to know my internal thoughts, I would have spoken them louder," she said sweetly.

"Whatever." Mary Ann glanced around. "Where's your boy toy?"

The heat of jealousy hit Kinsley like a wrecking ball and she nearly lost her breath. "He's not my boy toy. He's a man, and he's my boyfriend."

Mary Ann waved a hand in the air in dismissal. "Doesn't matter. Where is he?"

"Not here."

The other rider sniffed. "Figured he'd be here to give you a send-off."

"I'm not leaving until the morning," Kinsley explained, although why she felt compelled to defend herself against the spoiled daddy's girl in front

of her, she couldn't say.

Mary Ann studied her nails. "So you'll see him, then?"

Kinsley narrowed her gaze. "Why do you care? When or where I see him has nothing to do with you. At all."

There went that eyebrow again.

Geez. How long did she practice to get that so perfect?

"You're misunderstanding me," Mary Ann explained with a fake smile. "I'm just curious about your relationship. We hardly ever have girl talk."

We never have girl talk, and if I did, I wouldn't have it with you.

"Uh...thanks, but no thanks." Kinsley turned her back on her competition and pretended to be busy with packing her gear, despite the fact that it was done.

"Heard you've been having troubles lately," Mary Ann said casually.

Kinsley spun so fast, she nearly fell on her backside. "Excuse me?"

Mary Ann shrugged one delicate shoulder. If there was anything that Kinsley found herself jealous about with Mary Ann, it was her petite and feminine build. When the two women were standing next to each other, Kinsley often felt like the Jolly Green Giant, though she did her best not to let it bother her.

"Just rumors running around the barn." Mary Ann smirked. "How're your feet?"

Kinsley stepped out of her stall and into Mary Ann's space, crowding the smaller woman and causing her to step back a little. "What have you done?" Kinsley said, her jaw clenched so tight, it ached.

Mary Ann's face was unimpressed, but Kinsley could see her hands shaking slightly. "I haven't done anything. I've just been hearing little...tidbits." She cocked her head. "It sounds to me like Ritton's star pupil is going to lose her spot if she doesn't get her head on straight." She tapped her lips with a red manicured nail. "Does Sawyer know that you're such a klutz?"

Kinsley clenched her fists. "Go away, Mary Ann, unless you have something useful to say."

Mary Ann laughed, but it sounded forced. "I'm going, I'm going." She began to sashay down the walkway. "See you tomorrow!" She looked over her shoulder with a smirk.

Kinsley watched her club competitor go, her fingernails cutting into her palms. Once Mary Ann was gone, Kinsley forced herself to release her

hands. She shook them out, trying to bring feeling back to her fingers. "Stupid...spoiled...brat," she muttered.

Kinsley checked one more time to make sure everything looked okay, then headed out to her car. The conversation with Mary Ann was stewing in her brain. *I didn't think she had it in her,* Kinsley thought. *Is she really the one messing with my stuff or was she honestly just repeating gossip?* She chewed her lip as she drove before finally punching the button for her Bluetooth.

"Sawyer." His deep voice echoed through her car and Kinsley had to stiffen to her spine to stay upright. "Hello?"

"Hey," she finally sputtered. "Sorry." Kinsley cleared her throat. "I, uh...just wanted to fill you in on some information."

There was some shuffling on the other side of the line before Sawyer spoke. "Where are you?"

"Driving home from the club."

"I'll meet you there." The line went dead and Kinsley frowned.

"Thanks! See you soon! Drive safe!" She scrunched her nose. "Or how about a good old-fashioned, 'Goodbye'?" Kinsley blew a raspberry with her lips. "Manners still matter."

SAWYER PULLED INTO the Storm family driveway and quickly walked up to the door. He knocked and then waited. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels. *What information could she have gained? I thought she was supposed to be packing her tack.*

"Mr. Lockwood." Garrett Storm smiled as he opened the door to their grand home. "Good to see you." He held out his hand and Sawyer shook it as he stepped into the foyer.

"Good to see you, too, sir." Sawyer nodded. "I need to talk with Kinsley. Is she home?"

Garrett nodded. "She ran upstairs to shower." He smirked. "Probably didn't want to meet you smelling like the barn."

Sawyer nodded again, ignoring Mr. Storm's insinuation. He knew exactly what smell Kinsley's father was talking about, though. The smell of horse was very distinct and had been present during the last couple of weeks while Sawyer had hung around the barn. In fact, the smell was

practically seared into his brain, since Kinsley had smelled strongly of it when they'd kissed. Horse, leather, and sweat had mingled with other smells, and Sawyer had been surprised to find he wasn't as opposed to it as he thought he would be.

The idea of smelling like a large beast had never appealed to him before, but it was so...Kinsley. Everything about it reminded him of the beautiful model he had sworn to protect, and was far too attracted to.

"I'm here!"

Her voice penetrated Sawyer's heavy thoughts and he turned to see her practically skipping down the stairs. *Geez. Does she really get more gorgeous every time I see her? Or is my memory really that bad?*

A grunt and an elbow to his arm broke his stare, and he looked down at Mr. Storm.

The older man winked, then walked off with a smile on his face.

Crud. Now he knows I'm attracted to his daughter. Could this be any more embarrassing? Sawyer scrubbed his hands down his face, but stopped when he saw Kinsley frowning. "What?" he asked.

"What, what?" Kinsley threw up her hands. "I haven't even done anything and you're already irritated with me."

"I'm not irritated. I'm—" *Ridiculous? Starstruck? Twitterpated?*

"You're what?" Kinsley crossed her arms and tilted her head, obviously defensive.

Sawyer sighed. "Sorry. I'm not irritated at you. I was just thinking about something I need to take care of."

Kinsley's arms dropped and her frown softened. "Must be something terrible if you're that bothered by it."

Actually, it's not terrible at all. "It is, but it's my problem, not yours." He waved an arm toward her great room. "Why don't we sit, and you can tell me what happened at the barn."

Kinsley nodded and led the way. "Do you want something to drink?" she asked over her shoulder, veering toward the open kitchen as she walked.

"Water would be great," Sawyer said. *Maybe it'll cool down my stupid desire for another kiss*.

Kinsley was back quickly with two bottled waters, one of which she handed to Sawyer.

"Thank you," he mumbled. Twisting the top, he took a long pull, then set it down. "So, tell me what happened."

Kinsley pursed her lips and played with her bottle rather than taking a drink. “Nothing really...happened. But Mary Ann came over to have a chat.”

Sawyer wanted to roll his eyes. Mary Ann Donaldson was proving to be the exact stereotype Sawyer had originally thought Kinsley would be. Kinsley, however, was proving him wrong right and left. She worked hard, treated others kindly, and stood up for what she thought to be right. Very little of the spoiled princess Sawyer assumed would be present ever peeked through.

“And just what did she want to chat about?”

Something flashed in Kinsley’s eyes, but Sawyer couldn’t interpret it before it was gone. It did, however, catch his attention, and he straightened up, ready to listen carefully.

“You, mostly,” Kinsley said casually, finally taking a swig of her water.

Sawyer’s eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

A smirk tugged on Kinsley’s lips. “You heard me.”

“Why would I be a topic of conversation?”

Kinsley tilted her head to the side and gave him a look. “Are you kidding me? You have to know how attractive you are! I mean, honestly, you have the whole barn swooning at your every word!”

Sawyer’s eyebrows felt as if they were nearly at his hairline as he listened to her rant. “You think I’m attractive?”

Kinsley snapped her mouth shut and glared. “I’m not adding to your already massive ego, Sawyer. You want to know what you look like? Look in a mirror.”

Sawyer knew full well that women often found him attractive, but there was something about Kinsley admitting to it that set his blood to pumping. *But diving in deeper is only going to make my job harder. She’s a client. I’m a professional. No matchmaking will occur during this job.* “Back to what Mary Ann said,” Sawyer responded, ignoring Kinsley’s eye roll. “Why did you feel the need to let me know she thinks I’m cute?”

Kinsley sniffed. “That part wasn’t the most important part of the conversation, but I thought I should let you know you’re on her radar. She doesn’t seem the least bit worried that we’re supposed to be dating.”

Sawyer grinned when he realized her prickly attitude came from jealousy. *So this little obsession isn’t one-sided. I should be thrilled about that, but I have a feeling it’s only going to make things harder.* “So we need

to up our game. Got it." He held back a laugh at the look on Kinsley's face. It appeared she couldn't decide between elation and horror at the thought of being more convincing as a couple.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Whatever. The part I thought you should know about was when Mary Ann mentioned that I'd been having...troubles, as she put it."

Sawyer stiffened, immediately on the alert. "Troubles? She knew about your accidents?"

Kinsley shrugged. "She didn't mention anything specific, but claimed she'd heard rumors through the grapevine." She looked at Sawyer from under her lashes. "I'll be the first to admit there is definitely a strong gossip line within the club."

Sawyer nodded, then leaned his elbows on his knees. "I think you need to tell me everything word for word."

CHAPTER 8

Kinsley stroked Amadeus' neck absentmindedly. Her eyes were trained on the arena as she watched another young woman going through her routine.

"You ready?" Sawyer's deep voice sounded just behind her, making Kinsley jump a little.

She turned to look over her shoulder. "Don't scare me like that!" she whispered, then gulped. Sawyer was far too close for comfort. Being as tall as she was, it wasn't very often Kinsley had to look up at a man, but Sawyer still had several inches on her, even with her riding boots on. She tilted her chin a little to look him in the eye, and the intensity she saw made her knees buckle.

"Whoa, there." Sawyer wrapped his arms around her as she wobbled. His movement brought them even closer and Kinsley just knew she was going to have a heart attack.

That or my heart is literally going to jump out of my chest. Either way, I'm a total goner. This was the first show Sawyer had attended with her, and after last night's talk, they had decided it was more important than ever for him to stay close. *This is certainly close,* Kinsley thought sarcastically.

Despite the fact that she knew she should lock her knees and step back, she selfishly wanted to stay right where she was. Ever since their kiss a while back, she'd been aching for more from him. She knew their relationship was fake, but the spark she felt when they touched was beyond description, and Kinsley wanted more. Needed more.

"You okay?" Sawyer asked softly, his voice husky.

Kinsley opened her mouth to answer and his eyes dropped to her lips, ridding her mind of any chance of responding.

Slowly, painstakingly, Sawyer's head moved closer. "Kins..." he whispered.

Just as their lips touched, someone jolted them from behind.

Kinsley jumped out of Sawyer's arms and could have sworn she heard Sawyer growl softly. Turning, she scowled when she saw Mary Ann

looking at the two of them innocently.

"I didn't want you to miss your cue," the small woman said sweetly. She smiled at Sawyer, and Kinsley found herself wanting to grab Mary Ann's hair and give it a good yank.

Maybe that would teach her to interrupt something as amazing as that kiss was going to be. Her blood was still running hot, and Kinsley felt slightly feverish. Tugging on her collar, she took some deep breaths and tried to calm down. "Thanks, Mary Ann. Glad to know you're looking out for me," Kinsley forced herself to say.

Sawyer stepped up and wrapped an arm around her waist, kissing her ear. "I'm thrilled that Kins has such good friends." He squeezed Kinsley and gave a very fake smile to Mary Ann. "We wouldn't want her to miss her chance to win, now would we?"

Kinsley snorted as she tried to hold in her laughter at Mary Ann's look of disgust. With a curled lip and a flounce worthy of old time England, Mary Ann disappeared down the hall.

"That was good," Kinsley said with a smile and a nod. "She'll be ticked about that one for ages."

Sawyer shrugged and, to Kinsley's delight, left his arm around her. "Someone needs to put her in her place. Anyone who thinks they can just walk in and steal someone's significant other needs help."

"Significant other?" Kinsley raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you are?" She had meant the question to be teasing, but her heart had other ideas, and instead of sounding like flirting, it came out far too serious.

Sawyer's eyes darted between hers, and the conflicted look in them gave Kinsley a little more insight into the brooding Sawyer Lockwood. "For now," he finally said.

When he dropped his arm from her waist, Kinsley felt as if she was off balance, but she had far too much pride to beg him to come back. And truth be told, she didn't want a relationship where she had to beg. If the guy wasn't ready, she wasn't interested.

Sawyer stuffed his hand in his pockets. "So you never answered my question."

Kinsley blinked rapidly, striving to figure out what he was talking about. "What question?"

"Are you ready?"

"Oh!" She tilted her head back. "Uh, sure. As ready as I can be, I guess." She leaned her shoulder against Amadeus. "This big guy does all the real work anyway." She jabbed a thumb in the horse's direction, smiling when he snorted.

A boyish grin overcame Sawyer's face, and Kinsley held her breath to keep from puddling at his feet. "Maybe so, but you're still an important part of everything. Did you eat your lunch and stuff?"

Kinsley waved his concern away. "Nah. I was too nervous." Truth was, she was far more nervous than normal, thanks to the man standing next to her. The thought of him watching her in the ring had her tied up in knots. His opinion meant much more to her than it should have this early into their acquaintance.

Sawyer frowned. "You really should eat. Your dad told me you'll need your energy."

Kinsley smiled and patted his shoulder. "I'll eat when I'm done. I had a good breakfast before we headed out this morning, so I'll be fine until I finish."

"I could run and grab you a sandwich or something—"

"Sawyer." Kinsley held up a hand to stop him. His concern was totally sweet, but completely unnecessary. "Really. I'll be okay." She grinned. "This isn't my first show, ya know."

Sawyer grinned sheepishly and scratched at the short stubble on his chin. "I suppose." He glanced behind her. "Looks like you're up in a minute." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "You're sure nothing looked odd when you got ready?"

Kinsley shook her head. "No. For the first time in a while, everything was completely normal."

Sawyer pursed his lips and nodded, then glanced over his shoulder. "You go do your thing. I'm gonna sneak back and glance in Amadeus' stall, then I'll work my way back to the arena. I don't trust that your saboteur suddenly went quiet."

"I thought you weren't sure there actually was a saboteur," Kinsley shot out before she could think better of it. She winced internally. *Well, that's the perfect way to push him away,* she grumbled to herself.

Sawyer paused his retreat and glanced back. "I'm sorry I made a rash judgment," he said softly. "But Mary Ann's remarks the other day are definitely suspicious."

Kinsley's mouth dropped open a little as he turned and stalked away. *That was…something I never thought I'd hear out of his mouth.*

"Kinsley!" Coach Ritton growled as he marched toward her. "I don't know what's been wrong with you lately, but get yourself together. You're up in five."

Kinsley snapped her jaw shut and nodded. "I'm ready." She put her helmet on and attached the strap under her chin.

Coach Ritton waved an arm toward the entrance. "Get in there and show them how a horse is meant to be ridden."

Kinsley almost smiled at his command, but she held it back just in time. With another nod, she led Amadeus to the gate, then mounted onto his back. Patting his neck, she whispered, "We got this, boy. Let's show Sawyer what we're made of."

SAWYER NODDED AT OTHER contestants, their parents, and show workers as he made his way back to the stall Kinsley had been assigned. Everything had gone smoothly this morning. Almost too smoothly, considering the stories Kinsley had been telling him. Absolutely nothing had been out of place in Kinsley's tack boxes and luggage. *Apparently, she's just as meticulous as she claimed,* he thought to himself.

After seeing her things, he could understand why Kinsley felt that her forgetting multiple items wasn't likely. "Add Queenie's comments and there's definitely something fishy here," Sawyer murmured, using the nickname he had given Mary Ann because of her lofty airs.

Once Sawyer could see Kinsley's assigned space, he slowed, glancing up and down the long hallway of the barn. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to him as he approached the stall. Stepping up to the gate, he quickly scanned her gear, once again seeing nothing out of place. Sawyer growled softly and spun on his heel, only to jerk to a stop.

Tyrone stood ten feet away, glaring at Sawyer.

Remembering Kinsley's pleas and the scene Sawyer had watched with Tyrone and Coach Ritton, Sawyer forced an easy smile onto his face. "Hey, bud. How's it going?"

Tyrone's narrowed gaze didn't ease. "What are you doing here?" he ground out.

Sawyer frowned. “I’m here with Kinsley.”

One eyebrow slowly rose. “Oh, really? Then why are you in here while she’s preparing to go into the arena?” Tyrone folded his arms over his chest and smirked, like he had caught Sawyer in a lie.

Sawyer took a second to calm himself. He was ready to put this guy in his place, but held back because of his promise to Kinsley. “I was just checking on Kins’ stuff.” He stepped close to Tyrone and cocked his head. “At the last few shows, someone was messing with her things, and I told her I would make sure everything was okay.”

Tyrone’s eyes widened and his arms fell.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” Sawyer pushed.

“N-no.” Tyrone stumbled back a step. “Why would I do something like that?”

Sawyer stopped moving, not wanting to frighten Tyrone away. If Sawyer came on too strong, he knew the young man would bolt just like he did with Coach Ritton. Sawyer wanted answers, not for Tyrone to disappear. Sawyer shrugged. “I didn’t say you would do anything. We’re just trying to figure out what’s going on. A few of her things have gone missing.”

Tyrone gulped, his face deathly pale. “Someone is stealing from Ms. Storm?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Sawyer felt some of his animosity drain. *This guy has no backbone. Would he really be brave enough to act out?* “It appears that way.” He stepped up close. “Listen.” Sawyer put a hand on Tyrone’s shoulder, ignoring the way the young man flinched. *Stupid bullies*. “Can you keep your ear to the ground? Maybe see if anyone’s been bragging about getting away with something they shouldn’t have?”

“You think it’s a worker?” Tyrone’s brown eyes widened impossibly more.

Sawyer frowned again. The young man’s reaction seemed over the top, but Sawyer couldn’t quite tell why. *Is he scared because he thinks I suspect him? Is he scared he’ll be punished? Or is he scared because one of his buddies might be the culprit? Either way, I can’t quite take him off my list yet*. “We think it’s someone who has easy access to the barn,” Sawyer explained. He glanced down at his watch and cursed under his breath. “Look, I gotta go. Kinsley’s heading into the arena and I need to be there to watch her.” Sawyer backed up and pointed a finger at Tyrone. “But you’ll listen for any chatter?”

Tyrone nodded shakily.

Sawyer gave him a chin tilt and turned to jog back the way he had come. Once he was around the corner and out of sight, he stopped and stepped up against the wall. Ever so carefully, Sawyer peered around the corner, waiting to see what Tyrone would do with that information.

Tyrone was standing in the middle of the walkway, looking at the ground. When his gaze came up, Sawyer ducked back, praying he hadn't been seen. After counting to five, Sawyer once again looked around the corner, but Tyrone was gone.

"Shoot." Sawyer pinched his lips together. "Looks like I'm going to have to be patient a while longer." Kicking off into another jog, he headed for a seat in the stands. Whether he should or not, Sawyer was coming to like Kinsley for far more than her modelesque looks, and he had a strong desire to support her as she rode today.

He slipped into a seat just as she entered the ring. Clasping his hands together, he followed the cues of the spectators, having no idea when to clap or when to stay silent.

When she finished and the arena burst into loud applause, Sawyer couldn't help but add his own congratulations. When Kinsley led Amadeus out the gate, Sawyer quietly left his seat to go join her.

CHAPTER 9

Kinsley slid from Amadeus' back and immediately hugged her beloved horse. "We did it, boy. You are so wonderful!" She put a hand on either side of his face and kissed him between his eyes. "You're absolutely amazing!"

Her heart was still beating rapidly and sweat was trickling down her back, soaking into her blouse under her stiff jacket. The arena had been extra warm today as she'd felt Sawyer's burning gaze holding steady the entire performance.

"The day isn't done," Coach Ritton groused as he walked up to greet her.

Kinsley's smile was just as wobbly as her legs, but she forced one on anyway. She had been way more nervous than normal today, knowing that Sawyer was going to be watching her. For some reason, she was desperate to make a good impression on the tough bodyguard, though she hated the desire to do so.

"Your performance wasn't bad, but there were still mistakes." Ritton folded his hands over his chest. "Next time you need to—"

"How about we let her rest a little, then you can give her a lecture," a deep voice interrupted.

Kinsley's eyes nearly popped out of her sockets as she listened to Sawyer interrupt Coach Ritton. No one interrupted the famous coach, and she prepared herself for a terrible backlash.

Coach Ritton glared at Sawyer. "You have no right to interfere here." He pointed a finger at Sawyer. "Babying her won't make her a better horsewoman, and that's what I'm being paid to do."

"Driving her to the brink of exhaustion won't either," Sawyer argued, standing strong against the cranky coach. "Let her rest, see what her score was, and then you can talk strategy for the next ride."

Coach Ritton's face grew an angry red, but he kept his mouth closed. Finally, he turned to Kinsley. "It's your money going to waste if you don't

want to hear what I have to say. No skin off my back." With a huff, he turned and walked back over to the spot he observed the riders from.

"Oh my gosh," Kinsley whispered. "What are you doing?"

Sawyer smiled, causing Kinsley's heart to flutter. "Giving you a chance to catch your breath before he beats you into little pieces."

"Do you realize how tough he's going to be on me during practice now?" Kinsley shook her head. She was a mixture of annoyed and awestruck, and wasn't sure which emotion should win. "While I do need to sit down, I'm also dreading what he's going to do when we get home."

Sawyer grabbed her hand and began walking her down the hall. Kinsley quickly grabbed Amadeus' reins, the horse walking sedately beside her.

"Practice is the time to break down what went wrong. That's when he should work you hard. But during a show, he should be encouraging." Sawyer looked over his shoulder and winked. "The guy is a total bully, and they never handle it well when they find someone they can't intimidate. Most of the time, they back off, not willing to risk looking like a fool."

Kinsley shook her head and whistled low. "Pretty gutsy, if you ask me." She absolutely loved the feel of his hand holding hers. As busy as she was with her horse shows and modeling, Kinsley rarely had a chance to test out the dating scene. And now that she was experiencing what real chemistry was like, Kinsley wasn't sure she ever wanted to go back to the way things were.

She was fully aware that Sawyer was putting on an act, but there was no way to ignore the fact that the two of them had sparks. During those couple of times when he'd let down his guard, she had seen the same desire in his eyes that she felt in herself. *He might not want to admit it, but he's just as interested in me as I am in him. Now, if I could just convince him that it doesn't have to be fake. But maybe that should wait until after we catch whoever's out to get me.*

"Did you see anything suspicious when you checked on my stuff earlier?" Kinsley whispered as they drew near to her stall.

Sawyer glanced around and shook his head. "No. Though I did have an interesting conversation with Tyrone."

Kinsley pulled to a stop. "What did you say to him?" she asked, immediately defensive. "You didn't hurt him, did you?"

Sawyer's eyebrows furrowed. "No, I did not." He sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Look, Kins. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. I'm

trying to protect you. It's easy to see that Tyrone isn't treated well around here. I promise I didn't hurt him, but I did try to egg him on a bit. I need to know whether he's capable of taking your stuff or not."

Kinsley huffed. "I've already told you he's harmless."

"And I've already told you I'm not sure about that."

Kinsley closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Look." She shook her head. "I don't want to fight about this. I'll do my best to stay out of your way and not stop your investigation, but please...just be nice."

Sawyer stepped up close, crowding Kinsley. She felt her eyes widen and she automatically stepped backward, right into Amadeus' neck.

"I wasn't mean to him, Kins," Sawyer said softly. "I promise."

Kinsley swallowed hard. Those last two words echoed through her mind. *I promise*. He was completely serious, and Kinsley could feel the ring of truth to his words. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sawyer nodded, but didn't back up. His blue eyes were warm and inviting, and just like before the show, they were dark with intensity.

Kinsley held his gaze, daring him to complete the move they had been interrupted from earlier. His eyes darted down to her lips and Kinsley found herself leaning forward ever so slightly in invitation. Putting one hand on his chest, Kinsley tilted up on her tiptoes.

Sawyer squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, then leaned down and took control of Kinsley's lips.

Oh my word...Kinsley felt herself melt into the touch, and she was enjoying every minute of it. When Sawyer's arms slipped around her waist and tugged her in closer, a smile pulled at her lips, breaking their kiss.

"What are you laughing at?" Sawyer breathed as he moved to her jaw and cheek.

"Nothing," Kinsley said, tilting her head to give him better access. "Nothing at all."

"We really shouldn't take things this far," he said in a gruff voice. "This is supposed to be fake."

"I know," Kinsley said breathily, loving the feel of his lips still roving over her skin. *But that doesn't mean I want it to be that way.*

Sawyer sighed and rested his forehead in the crook of her neck. "Kins..."

Kinsley also sighed, but this time in disappointment. "I know." She closed her eyes, wishing he could just give in and admit that there was

really something between them.

Sawyer straightened, his emotionless face back in place. “Come on. Let’s get Amadeus taken care of so you can eat.”

Kinsley nodded and waited for Sawyer to open her stall gate so she could take her horse inside.

WHAT WAS I THINKING? Sawyer chastised himself. *I wasn’t, and that’s exactly the problem. I’ve never had trouble controlling myself before. How does she do this to me?*

Sawyer watched Kinsley take care of her animal, cooing and talking to Amadeus as if he were human, and Sawyer couldn’t help but grin. He was coming to realize more and more that this woman was a nurturer. She watched out for everyone, especially the underdog, as evidenced by the way she stood up for Tyrone. And now, watching her treat her horse so well was just another piece of the Kinsley puzzle. *Unfortunately, she’s proving to be anything but the princess I thought she was.*

Determined to put his mind on something else, Sawyer grabbed Kinsley’s lunch cooler. “You ready to eat? You need to maintain your energy.”

Kinsley smiled and shook her head. “You’re supposed to be watching out for the bad guy, not worried about my stomach.”

Sawyer shrugged. “I’m committed to taking care of all parts of you, whether outside or inside.” As soon as the words slipped out, he wished he could take them back. They were far too revealing as to where his emotions were headed regarding the gorgeous woman in front of him. By the look on Kinsley’s face, his slip hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“Sawyer...” she started.

Sawyer shook his head and held up the cooler. “We can’t, Kins. Let’s just get you fed.” The hurt on her face hit Sawyer right in the chest and he could have sworn his heart stuttered. He opened his mouth to apologize, then snapped it shut. He couldn’t. He couldn’t give into his growing feelings. Not only did he need to hold onto a professional demeanor during this case, but he refused to be just another matchmaking statistic in Harlan’s firm. His older brother needed someone on his side, and with all the other

bodyguards pairing off right and left, it was making Harlan's life much more difficult as he no longer had access to his workers twenty-four-seven.

He needs at least one of us to stay the course, Sawyer reminded himself. *And it looks like that's going to be me.*

Kinsley held out her hand for the cooler, then sat down on a bale of straw in the corner of the stall.

Forcing himself to stay outside the gate so he couldn't cuddle up to Kinsley and take advantage of their solitude, Sawyer turned around and leaned against the gate, folding his arms over his chest.

His eyes went up and down the hallway, scanning the other people and keeping an eye out for anything unusual. The place seemed to run like a well-oiled machine. Workers in their recognizable black button-up shirts hurried around, cleaning stalls, answering questions, and sending the contestants in the right direction.

As Sawyer's eyes went to the right, they suddenly clashed with an amused smirk.

Mary Ann wiggled her fingers at him, her lips pushed out in a flirty pout.

Sawyer snorted softly and gave her a polite nod, then turned away, doing his best to convey his disinterest without actually having to say anything. *That girl is starting to get on my nerves,* he grumbled internally.

"Sawyer..." Kinsley's voice was soft and strained and Sawyer hung his head, knowing she was going to want to talk about what happened earlier.

He closed his eyes and prayed for courage before straightening up. "Look, Kins—" Sawyer turned and immediately cut off his words. His eyes widened as he watched Kinsley fall off the bale and begin to convulse. Panic shot through him and Sawyer jumped into action, his body knowing exactly what to do, though his mind was a scrambled mess. "SOMEBODY CALL 911!" he bellowed, ripping open the gate and diving inside. Amadeus snorted and shifted to the side, stomping a little, but Sawyer ignored the horse.

"KINSLEY!" He picked her up in his arms, shaking her a little. "Kins, answer me, hon. Please." His voice dropped into a hoarse whisper. "Please, it can't end like this." Desperation pulsed through him and Sawyer put his ear to her chest. Closing his eyes, he said a quick prayer of thankfulness that her heart was still beating, and though her breathing was shallow, she was still taking in air.

Suddenly her back arched and she stiffened in his arms, shaking like she was having a seizure.

"What's going on?" Coach Ritton came storming up to the stall, his face livid, but when he spotted Kinsley, all the red fury immediately drained. "Kinsley?"

"Call 911," Sawyer ordered, not knowing if anyone else had heeded his previous command.

"I've got it!" a worker called, running up to the stall. She gasped when she saw Kinsley. "What's wrong with her?"

Sawyer shook his head. "I don't know. One minute she was fine, and the next, she was on the floor, shaking." He looked to Coach Ritton. "Take Amadeus out of here."

The horse was getting agitated, shifting around and throwing his head back as if he knew his master was sick.

The coach nodded and grabbed a bridle, quickly throwing it over the horse's head and leading him out of the stall.

A strangled gasp caught Sawyer's attention and he turned just in time to see Mary Ann standing with her hands over her mouth. Sawyer narrowed his gaze, wondering if the girl had a hand in this. *Was she trying to take out the competition?* He shook his head. *There's no time for that now. Focus on Kinsley.*

A large crowd was gathering around the stall, but Sawyer ignored them all. He kept a hand on Kinsley's chest, keeping an eye on her breathing and heartbeat, and his other kept touching her face, while he murmured soothing words.

"It's okay, Kins. Help is on the way." He brushed back her hair. Her eyes were wild, but she focused them on him. She looked terrified, and Sawyer tried to smile. "Just keep breathing." He nodded when she sucked in a gasping breath. "That's it. Just keep breathing, and help will be here any minute."

"Out of the way!" A deep voice came from down the hallway, causing the crowd to part like the Red Sea. Two men and one woman burst into the stall, a stretcher left in the walkway. "What do we have?"

Sawyer backed up to let them work, reluctantly giving up his connection to Kinsley. The loss of touch sent his heart into overdrive and he realized that by helping her, he had also been keeping himself calm. *I'm in even deeper than I thought*. He scrubbed a hand down his face. "She was

eating lunch and suddenly went into convulsions. That's all I know. Her breathing has been rapid and shallow, and her heart racing."

"Grab the lunch," the man said to one of the other paramedics. "Did she ever lose consciousness?" he asked Sawyer as he shone a light in Kinsley's eyes, looking for dilation.

"Not that I'm aware of," Sawyer added. He stood and folded his arms together. The need to hold her was overwhelming, but he knew the paramedics needed him out of the way.

"Let's get her loaded," the woman said. Together they lifted Kinsley and put her on the stretcher. After grabbing their supplies, they took off, Sawyer trailing behind them.

"Hold it," the woman said when Sawyer tried to follow them into the ambulance. "Just who are you?"

"I'm her—" Sawyer stopped himself before he said bodyguard. *We've got to catch who did this. I can't give myself away yet.* "I'm her boyfriend."

The woman eyed him. "Family only in the ambulance."

Sawyer felt every muscle in his body stiffen. There was no way he could be separated from Kinsley and keep his cool. "Does fiancé count as family?"

The paramedic narrowed her gaze. "You said boyfriend."

Sawyer shrugged. "The engagement is very recent."

"Jill, we gotta go!" one of the men shouted from his spot inside.

Jill rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Jump in or get left behind. We're leaving."

Sawyer wasted no time in scrambling up and plopping himself on the opposite side of the paramedics. He immediately grabbed Kinsley's hand, and the squeeze she gave him let him know he had made the right choice. "I'm here, Kins," he said softly, stroking her cheek. "I'm here."

CHAPTER 10

Kinsley blinked rapidly. The bright lights above made her eyes water and the noise of the hospital room was giving her a migraine. She clenched her teeth together as she felt another spasm roll through her body, and the doctors and nurses scrambled to keep her from falling off the bed.

The words they were shouting sounded as if they were in another language as they gave medical orders and parried ideas of what could be happening to her. However, one word has been easy enough to recognize. Poison. The doctors believed she had been poisoned.

How could I have been poisoned? Was there something wrong with my lunch? We just got groceries a few days ago and nothing smelled bad or was moldy.

"She's lucky it was such a small dose," one of the nurses murmured.

This is a small dose? Kinsley wanted to yell, but her pain level was too high for her to be able to speak coherently. Instead, she gripped her sheets and prayed for it all to be over. A needle was stuck in her arm and connected to an IV, where they immediately began to pump fluids and medication into her system.

"This'll help bring down those spasms," a nurse said as she put her face in Kinsley's point of view and smiled.

Kinsley tried to nod, but every muscle in her body was so exhausted from the episodes that she could barely lift her chin. *Where's Sawyer?* she wondered. *I need him back*. His calm presence and warm hand had been the only thing she could focus on when she'd first fallen ill. His deep voice was so strong, and his protectiveness came through each time he spoke, helping her feel as if it would truly be all right.

"Okay, then..." The doctor sighed and pulled off his gloves. "Looks like we finally got it under control."

At his words, Kinsley realized her tight muscles were finally relaxing, and though she was still in pain, she didn't feel any imminent spasms. *Thank goodness. Now they can send Sawyer in*. As her muscles relaxed even more, Kinsley's eyelids began to feel thick and heavy.

"Sleep, honey. It'll help you feel better," the nurse from earlier urged. "We've got it all handled for now."

"Does she have family in the waiting area?" the doctor asked.

"Her father and fiancé are there," came the response.

Fiancé? What the heck? Kinsley's eyebrows shot up, even though her eyes remained closed. She had no idea who they were talking about, but the shock wasn't strong enough to pull her from her exhausted, medically induced slumber. With a soft sigh, she gave in and slipped under.

When consciousness came again, the room was much quieter than before. All of the doctors and nurses must have left, as there was no sound coming from the space around Kinsley. It took her a few tries to open her eyelids. Her body still felt overly heavy and tired from the events of the afternoon.

Her room was semi-dark and she realized the light was off, though a bathroom light was on over in the corner, providing just enough visibility for Kinsley to look around the room. She fumbled at the side of the bed for the button to push herself upright.

"Kinsley?"

Kinsley snapped toward the sound and gasped as she watched her father rise from the couch. "Dad!"

He rushed over and embraced her, being careful not to disturb any of her tubes and wires. "Oh my darling." His shoulders shook as he cried into her neck. "How could this have happened?"

"It's okay, Dad," she whispered, clinging tightly to his back. "I'm here. It's okay." Kinsley rubbed her hands up and down, doing her best to soothe her sobbing father. Her heart sank as she thought of what would have happened if she'd died. *He's never gotten over losing Mom. Losing me, too, would have crushed him.*

Garrett stood up and wiped his eyes. Wrinkles were far more prominent on his face than normal, and dark bags lay under his eyes, causing Kinsley to feel terribly guilty for everything she was putting him through.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," she rushed to say. Her voice was hoarse and she coughed a little, clearing her throat.

"Here." The voice Kinsley had been dreaming of hearing came from her other side and she slowly turned. Sawyer stood beside her bed, concern radiating from every part of him as he held out a hospital mug full of ice water.

“Thank you,” Kinsley said softly. Her hand shook as she reached for the handle, and Sawyer pulled it out of reach.

“Let me help,” he said in a soft voice.

Kinsley’s first instinct was to refuse, but the moment felt much deeper than just him thinking she was weak. As he brought the straw to her mouth, their eyes stayed locked. Sawyer's large hand came to rest on her upper back, supporting her as she took in several long swallows. The cold water was a stark contrast to the heat traveling through her, growing hotter the longer she and Sawyer stared at each other.

When she was done, she leaned back a little and he removed his hand, only to brush a hair off her cheek. “Better?”

She nodded, words failing her in the face of his sweet care. *This is not the Sawyer Lockwood I’ve gotten to know. Where’s his cocky and flirty attitude? Where’s the brooding stoicism I’ve come to expect from him?*

“How are you feeling?” Her father drew her attention back to the other side of the bed. Garrett pulled up a chair and grabbed Kinsley’s hand, pressing it tightly between his own.

“Tired, but okay,” Kinsley answered honestly. She tried to stay focused on her dad, but her eyes kept drifting back to the silent bodyguard on her left. Everything felt better with him there. All her anxiety and fears of what had happened earlier seemed to drain away, and she knew he would do everything within his power to protect her. *Now, if only he would be willing to stick around for longer than it takes us to catch the person trying to kill me.*

GUILT AND SHAME RODE heavy on Sawyer’s shoulders as he watched Kinsley calm down her father. Garrett Storm was completely overwrought and had come rushing into the hospital like a hurricane, shouting and calling for his daughter.

Luckily, Sawyer had been able to intercept the older man before he’d accosted a nurse or doctor and gotten himself thrown out of the hospital. It had taken a considerable amount of effort to calm him down and wait for word on Kinsley’s condition.

The crew at Lockwood Industries had also been on pins and needles, asking for updates every few minutes, to the point where Sawyer had been

ready to throw his phone out the window. Every text they sent was just another reminder that she had been hurt on his watch. *I failed. I had one job, and I failed.*

He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. *I shouldn't even be here. She probably doesn't want me here and would rather be assigned another bodyguard.* He leaned onto his knees and hung his head. No matter how much he knew he didn't belong, Sawyer couldn't deny that he wanted to be there. He wanted to take care of her. He wanted to see that she got better, and he wanted to crush the person who had done this. Kinsley brought out more protective instincts in him than anyone he had ever known, and for a man who knew he was destined for the military since he was a young boy, that was saying something.

"Sawyer?" Kinsley's soft voice brought him out of his self-loathing. "Are you all right?"

Sawyer huffed. "You're the one in the hospital and you're asking *me* if I'm all right?"

Kinsley lay back against her pillows and gave a soft smile. "You look so...sad."

He swallowed hard. "I need to apologize to you."

Kinsley frowned. "What?"

"I...I failed you." Sawyer's gaze dropped to the floor. He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye as he put himself at her mercy. Kinsley may be a nurturer, but she was also whip smart and got things done. She didn't put up with failure.

"I don't understand."

"I was there to protect you," Sawyer said, forcing himself to man up and look at her. "I didn't do it. I have one job. *One job!*" he said through clenched teeth. "And I failed."

"Sawyer," she started. "No one blames you for this."

Sawyer shook his head. "I do. I should have been better prepared."

"How?" Garrett burst in. "According to the doctors, someone planted poison in her lunch."

Kinsley gasped. "Really? I heard the doctors and nurses talking when I first came in, but everything was such a big blur..." Her bottom lip began to tremble. "Why is someone trying to kill me?"

"No," Sawyer ground out, drawing the attention back to himself. He took a deep breath and shook his head. "The doctors confirmed there wasn't

enough strychnine in the food to kill you, but it was definitely enough to incapacitate you." He deflated in his seat. "If they were trying to kill you, they're pretty poor at research, because it actually doesn't take very much strychnine to kill an adult. The fact that they used so little tells us they knew how to handle the stuff."

"Incapacitate me? What exactly do you mean?" Kinsley's eyes were heavy with unshed tears, and her pain tugged at Sawyer's heart. He wanted to take all of this away from her, but it was out of his hands.

"I think they were trying to keep you from riding," Sawyer stated.

"But they didn't," Kinsley pointed out. "I didn't eat until after I rode because I was so nervous."

Sawyer tried to stay calm as he helped her understand, but the audacity of whoever was doing these things had him infuriated. "But what's your normal schedule, Kinsley? If you have a midday ride, do you usually eat beforehand?"

Kinsley opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. "Yes," she said in a small voice. Those tears began to dribble down her cheeks. "They knew. They knew I would eat before my ride. They knew my schedule."

Sawyer nodded slowly. He felt like a complete jerk pointing out that this was someone close to her.

Kinsley looked up at her dad, who was also crying. "Why would they do that? Is someone really that desperate to win?"

"I don't know, honey," Garrett soothed. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her head against his chest. "I just don't know."

Kinsley sniffled and grabbed a tissue from the side table to wipe her nose. "Maybe we need to notify the Executive Board."

"No!" Sawyer practically shouted. He paused and cleared his throat when he realized how loud he had been. "Sorry. But you can't tell anyone what's going on."

"Why not?" Mr. Storm asked forcefully. "This person has to be stopped."

Sawyer stood up and put out his hand in a plea to the small family. "You're right. They do." His eyes locked with Kinsley's. "Now more than ever. But if you go spreading word about it, odds are they'll disappear and you'll never catch them. The only way to get to the bottom of this is for you to stay quiet and alert. If the perpetrator feels safe in hurting you again, they'll take another risk."

Kinsley chewed on her lip. “That makes sense, but what if next time is too late?” She blinked several times and wiped at her eyes. “What if they actually do kill me?”

“Don’t say that,” Mr. Storm ground out, clutching her tighter.

Sawyer shook his head. “They’re not trying to kill you, I promise,” he assured her.

“You can’t know that for sure,” Kinsley argued, straightening up from her position against her dad. “Maybe they didn’t this time, but each time they’ve done something, it’s gotten worse.”

Sawyer closed his eyes and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I know this must feel terrifying, being in your position, but I honestly believe that if they wanted you dead, they would have done it by now.”

“That’s not reassuring,” Garrett said through clenched teeth. “And how do you propose to catch this person?”

Shame flooded through Sawyer and he forced himself to step back. “I won’t be,” he said softly. His heart broke a little more with every word, but he knew it had to be done.

“What?” Kinsley’s eyebrows furrowed together. “I don’t understand.”

“I won’t be the one catching him,” Sawyer said again. “I’m having myself removed from the case.”

A choking sound came from Kinsley and she put a fist over her mouth. “Why?” she finally rasped out, “Why would you do that?”

“Because I failed,” Sawyer said, his eyes frozen on hers. He knew Mr. Storm probably had plenty to say, but right now the only person that mattered was Kinsley. “I failed and you were hurt.” He shook his head and backed up further. “I won’t risk letting that happen again.” Sawyer’s back hit the door and he fumbled for the knob. “I’ve asked Harlan to step in. He’s the best of the best. You’ll be in good hands.”

Quickly, Sawyer slipped out before he had a chance for second thoughts. Kinsley’s whispered words as he left branded into his brain, and he knew they would forever haunt him.

“But I don’t want anyone else.”

CHAPTER 11

During the next twenty-four hours that Kinsley was stuck in the hospital, she cried more tears than she had in the last ten years combined. Having Sawyer walk out on her had broken her heart in ways she hadn't realized it could be broken.

No matter how many times she reminded herself that their relationship had been fake, that he'd been acting, that their kisses meant nothing, her heart wouldn't believe it.

Her father was no help. He had patted her hand and told her that maybe it was for the best. "He's too emotionally involved," he'd said. "Bringing someone else in who sees you only as a client might help them view the situation with more clarity. No extra feelings to muddy the waters."

Kinsley had turned her back on her father, feigning sleep. *I don't want anyone else. I want him. No one will protect me like Sawyer will. It's exactly because he cares that he'll do the best job. My safety won't matter as much to anyone else.*

"Everything looks good." The on-call doctor glanced at all Kinsley's vitals. "I think we can get your paperwork going and let you get back to your own bed tonight." He smiled. "Sound good to you?"

Kinsley nodded, but there was no excitement in the announcement. Ever since Sawyer had left, the world had seemed gray and boring.

"That's good news," her father said with an overly bright smile. "It'll sure be nice to get home and take a shower."

The doctor laughed lightly and nodded. "Great. Well, hang tight and we'll start the discharge process."

Time became a blur as the nurses went in and out, unplugging Kinsley from all her monitors, going through paperwork and insurance information. After changing into some sweats her father had brought her, she sat numbly on the bed and let her father handle anyone that came through the door.

"Looks like you're good to go!" The perky nurse smiled wide. "Let's hop in the wheelchair and your father can lead the way."

Kinsley didn't even bother to argue about the invalid treatment. She wasn't sure how well her legs would hold up anyway. Her whole body felt thick and lethargic. Whether that was left over from yesterday's episode or because her heart no longer worked properly, for the first time ever, Kinsley let someone baby her without even muttering a peep.

The ride home was silent. The atmosphere of the car felt thick with tension and despair. Although her brain seemed to be running a marathon, Kinsley couldn't think of any way to break the awkwardness.

Her dad reached over and squeezed her knee. "Hang in there, kiddo. It'll all turn out for the best."

Kinsley shook her head and turned to look out the window. *He doesn't understand,* she thought bitterly. *I really thought I was falling for Sawyer, and he just walked away. He walked. A. Way. As if I meant nothing. As if those kisses didn't shake him to his core. As if all those sparks were nothing more than ashes. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have not seen that he didn't feel the same? What's that stupid old cliché? Love is blind?* She snorted. *I'm not sure truer words have ever been spoken.*

SAWYER HAD TUNED OUT Harlan's lecture several minutes ago. *Let him just get his anger off his chest and then we'll get down to business.* Currently, Harlan was pacing in front of Sawyer, shouting about professionalism and finishing what he started.

Sawyer stood at attention, his legs spread and his hands clasped behind his back. His face was stoic and the lack of emotion ran through his entire body. Ever since walking out on Kinsley, Sawyer had felt...dead.

Despite his best efforts, he'd started to fall for the model. Every time she stood up to him, every time he watched her muck stalls or talk to her horse. Every time he saw that there was so much more to her than wealth and beauty...he fell a little harder.

He'd tried to stop it. He'd scolded himself a thousand times, but it hadn't mattered. The woman he thought would be a spoiled princess had ended up as the key to his heart instead.

And that is the real reason I had to walk away. I couldn't let it go on. I was too close. Kinsley's chances of being hurt were far greater with a distracted bodyguard, not to mention I couldn't do that to Harlan.

Sawyer suddenly realized the room had gone quiet and he glanced at his brother. Harlan was standing patiently, his thighs resting against his desk and his arms folded over his chest. “Done with your internal monologue?” Harlan asked sarcastically.

Sawyer ground his teeth a little, but forced himself to stay calm. “Yes,” he said curtly.

“Good.” Harlan pushed off the desk and walked around to sit in his seat. “Then I think it’s time you went back to work.”

Sawyer waited, but Harlan didn’t speak any more. “What case do you want me to work on?” he finally asked.

Harlan looked up and raised an eyebrow. “The Storm case.”

Sawyer sputtered. “What? I already told you I needed to hand that one off.”

Harlan pursed his lips and nodded. “Yes, you did. But I don’t agree with you.”

Red hot anger was starting to boil, and Sawyer was having a hard time keeping it contained. He had already been an emotional wreck since he’d left the hospital, though he’d hidden it well. He’d shoved everything inside a tiny box in the back of his brain, but now that box was bursting open and Sawyer was scrambling to contain it. “I’m not the right man for the job,” he said through clenched teeth.

Harlan didn’t appear the slightest bit put out by Sawyer’s tone. “Then become the right man.”

Sawyer’s chest began to heave as he sucked in deep breaths and he pushed his hands through his curls. “I can’t, Har! Can’t you see that? I’m too close! I can’t protect her the way she deserves.” He growled and shook his head. “What good is a bodyguard who can’t see the danger?”

Harlan leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands in his lap. “Are you saying you want to quit our firm?”

“No! I just can’t do this case.”

Harlan narrowed his eyes. “What makes this case so difficult, Sawyer?” He leaned forward, his folded hands on his desk now. “Why are you able to guard someone else, but not Ms. Storm?”

“Because.” Sawyer’s fists clenched. *Why is he pushing this? He has a whole bunch of other guards he could assign. Just let it go!*

“Because isn’t good enough.”

“Because...I already failed her once.”

Harlan's eyebrows raised. "So you think the perpetrator is smarter than you? That you won't ever be able to catch him or her?"

"I never said that," Sawyer ground out, stepping closer to the desk.

"You just said you can't do this case, so what else am I supposed to think?" Harlan smirked, then went on. "If you can't finish this case, how can I trust you with another one? How do I know you won't walk away again, saying it isn't for you?"

"Because I'm not in love with any other client!" Sawyer bellowed, hitting his fist on Harlan's desk. Bringing his other hand up to rest on the desk, Sawyer hung his head between his arms, taking deep breaths to try and slow down his heart rate. He hadn't meant to confess all that to Harlan, but maybe now his brother would understand his predicament.

"I see," Harlan said softly.

When nothing more was said, Sawyer risked looking up. "You see what?"

Harlan shrugged and shook his head. "I just see. You only confirmed what I'd already suspected."

Sawyer snorted and stepped backward to slump into a chair. "Can you understand now why I want to be reassigned?"

"No."

Sawyer rolled his eyes. "I'm too distracted, Har. She needs someone who will protect her."

"And you'd honestly trust her protection to another man?" Harlan pressed. "You'd let me walk on in, play the part of her boyfriend?"

Sawyer felt a muscle twitch in his jaw as he thought of Harlan holding and kissing Kinsley. Jealousy, hot and raging, swept through him.

"Because you know it'd have to be one of us triplets. We've already established a cover. We can't blow it now."

"Y..." Sawyer took a deep breath, trying to force himself to answer. "I..." He hung his head. "I don't know." He wanted to be able to let someone else take over, but Harlan was right. Sawyer wasn't sure he could let someone else take his place without tearing the guy's head off.

"And how does Ms. Storm feel about all this?" Harlan asked quietly.

Sawyer shrugged. "We've never really talked about it."

"But?"

"But I think she feels the same."

Harlan sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. “Apparently turning us boys into bodyguards was all Mom needed to do in order to marry us off.” He chuckled harshly. “Too bad she’s not here to see it.”

Sawyer had nothing to say to that.

“Go, Sawyer. Don’t keep her waiting, but be sure to get rid of whoever is hurting her. You two won’t be free until you do.”

Sawyer’s head jerked up. “You can’t be serious.”

Harlan frowned, obviously confused.

“You’re...giving me your blessing?”

Harlan shrugged. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because all your employees are falling like Cupid’s been on a drinking binge!” Sawyer leaned forward. “How can you be so calm about that? Doesn’t it bother you?”

Harlan’s face relaxed and he leaned back, studying his brother for a moment. “I know I don’t talk about my time as a prisoner of war.”

Sawyer held his breath, wondering if his closed-off brother was actually going to open up. Harlan had never been the same since he’d returned to U.S. soil, but he refused to speak to anyone about it.

“And truthfully, I’m not going to tell you about it now. But I will say that I would be the worst kind of person if I denied those I love their chance at happiness.” His blue eyes were flashing as he spoke. “Especially in a world where I’ve seen the very dregs of society.” He leaned forward. “If you’ve found your opportunity, don’t waste it.”

CHAPTER 12

"Mr. Lockwood called," Kinsley's father said as Kinsley came down to breakfast the next morning.

Kinsley sucked in a breath, then cursed herself for her reaction. "Yeah?" she forced herself to say cooly. "He sending over someone new?"

"Your bodyguard and fake boyfriend should be here within the hour," her father continued. His back was to her as he flipped pancakes at the stove, so Kinsley wasn't able to see the look on his face.

Kinsley shrugged. "I'm sure Harlan will send the right man."

Her father hmphed, but otherwise didn't respond.

Anyone who doesn't leave in the middle of a job is the right man, Kinsley thought to herself. Sometime during the night, she'd gone from broken by Sawyer's betrayal to angry. She couldn't believe that Sawyer would walk out on her...on *them*, after all they'd been through the last couple of weeks.

He'd kissed her until she'd melted into a gooey puddle, and then he had the nerve to leave when she needed him most. *How dare he,* she thought angrily. *How dare he barrel his way into my heart and then turn away as if it meant nothing. He's nothing but a—*"

The doorbell rang, interrupting her angry, mental tirade.

"You mind getting that?" her father asked as he continued to pile pancakes on a plate.

"Sure." Kinsley forced a peppy tone into her voice even though she felt anything but. Despite her frustrations and heartache, she didn't want another bodyguard. She wanted the guy who sent her pulse through the roof. She wanted the brooding man who made her feel more alive than she ever had before. She wanted the bodyguard who had saved her life and stolen her heart. She wanted Sawyer.

Doubly angry that she still had feelings for such a jerk, Kinsley stormed to the door and yanked it open, only to nearly fall on her backside when the very face she'd been dreaming about was standing on her doorstep.

It's probably one of his identical brothers, she reassured herself. *No need to be in a panic. It's not Sawyer.* "Hi," she said with a tight smile.

The man on her doorstep frowned slightly. "Hi?" He phrased the greeting like a question, as if he was unsure of his welcome.

Kinsley's laugh was awkward. "I'm afraid I don't know which brother you are. I can't tell you all apart."

Understanding lit the bodyguard's eyes and a slow grin crept across his face. "And if I don't want to tell you?"

Kinsley's brows furrowed. "Then I'd guess you were Ridge?" She tilted her head to the side, trying to find any type of identifying features. "Sawyer said he was the flirtatious one."

The triplet rolled his eyes and grumbled something under his breath.

Kinsley studied the man even harder before gasping and backing away from the door. "S-sawyer?" she stammered. "What are you doing here?"

To his credit, Sawyer immediately looked repentant. "How did you know it was me?"

Kinsley bit her tongue. She had no intention of telling him that while they were kissing, she had discovered one of the curls just behind his left ear was wound so tight it was like spring. For whatever reason, it was far more curly than the rest of his hair, staying in a tight little ball unless a person tugged on it or ran their fingers through it. Of which Kinsley had done both. In fact, the more she thought of it, the more she wanted to do it again, but she clenched her fingers into fists instead. "I asked what you're doing here," she reiterated.

"I came to apologize."

"Well, now you've done it. So goodbye." Kinsley moved to close the door, but she wasn't fast enough.

Sawyer's large hand and strong arm held the door wide open. "I don't think so," he said softly.

"I don't think you have any say in the matter," Kinsley snipped. She was already a mess of emotions. She had definitely not woken up with the intention of speaking to the man who had sent her over the edge.

"As your bodyguard and boy— fake boyfriend, I have plenty of say."

"You..." Kinsley let go of the door and stormed toward him, her finger poking him in the chest. "Are not my bodyguard, nor my fake boyfriend. You left. Left, Sawyer! You turned and walked away from me while I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL!" Kinsley's chest was heaving and, unknown to her,

tears had begun to pour down her cheeks. She knew she should probably stop yelling and go back in the house, but she couldn't bring herself to care. *Let the neighbors listen. Maybe they'll learn something.*

Sawyer's face was tired and resigned. "I know," he said softly. "And it nearly broke me. That moment will forever be my greatest regret."

"I..." Kinsley's breathing grew more and more erratic. She didn't know how to keep yelling at him. *How can he stand there and say he regrets it? He doesn't get to regret it! I'm the one who was hurt.* Instead of saying any of those things, Kinsley felt as if her words had been taken from her. She couldn't speak, and she couldn't breathe. Finally, she broke down into sobs. Covering her face with her hands, she let the rest of the tears come. All the feelings and stress of the last couple of days came pouring out of her in a decidedly undignified manner.

"Ah, Kins," Sawyer groaned. He wrapped his thick arms around her and tucked her into his chest.

"You...walked a...way," she gasped through her tears, hitting his chest once with her fist, but there was no real fire in the contact. The very next moment, she grasped his shirt with both hands and burrowed into his strength, praying it would help hold her together and not caring that she was drenching his clothes.

"I know," he said soothingly, rubbing a hand across her back in circles. "I know, and it was wrong. I-I was scared, Kins." He rested his cheek against the side of her head in a tender embrace.

Kinsley tucked her forehead into the crook of his neck and rested a hand against his heart. She could feel it pounding in his chest. The sensation helped calm her own. Letting go of his shirt, she wrapped her other arm around his chest and hugged him closer.

"I was too close," he continued in a hoarse whisper. "You are far too beautiful for your own good, and I was getting too close." He sighed, and she felt a kiss to her temple before he continued. "Seeing you get hurt when I was right there terrified me in a way I have never felt, and trust me when I say I've been in situations where most men would curl up in a ball and cry."

SAWYER HAD NO IDEA why he was spilling all of this to the woman in his arms. He hadn't planned to. Despite Harlan's advice, Sawyer had

planned to apologize and get back to work, keeping his focus on protection and nothing else. However, when he'd seen the heartache and heard the anguish in her voice, he'd known it wouldn't work. It would never be able to be strictly business between them. They were already in too deep.

She sniffled. "I'll bet," she answered quietly.

Sawyer nodded and gave her a squeeze. He didn't want to dwell on his time in the military, but he wanted...no, *needed* her to understand. "When I realized that it was because of my failure that you were in there, I knew I had to leave. You're too precious and valuable to lose, and although it took every ounce of self-discipline I had, I needed to back out and let someone who was more clear-headed keep you safe."

She shifted in his arms and looked up at him, her mouth open and ready to speak, but Sawyer put a finger to her lips.

"Hear me out, please," he whispered.

Kinsley closed her mouth and nodded.

"I've never been one to commit to a woman, Kins," he said while still looking her in the eye. "My brothers call me the playboy." He shrugged. "I wasn't trying to toy with anyone, but I definitely found no reason to keep any relationship long term." His eyes roamed her face. Even flushed from crying, she was stunning. "When I was first assigned your case, I wasn't exactly...thrilled," he admitted.

Kinsley snorted.

A crooked smile pulled at his lips. "I was sure you were going to be a rich, spoiled princess, but you've done nothing but prove me wrong during our time together. You're kind, you stand up for what you believe is right, and you fight for the underdog like a champ."

Kinsley closed her eyes and shook her head. A small smile played on her lips.

"And it got under my skin. I've always been a protector, but now I was encountering a different type of foe. I've never had to protect my heart before." He took a breath for courage when Kinsley stirred in his arms again. He had reached the breaking point. He was laying everything on the line and she would have the opportunity to reciprocate or reject. "And when you were hurt and I realized how much was out of my control, it scared me off."

Her dark eyes were wounded, but she held his gaze. "So now what do we do?"

Sawyer wanted to crumple in relief at her words. A part of him had expected her to slap him and walk away, but true to form, she was defying every stereotype he could come up with. Slowly, he brought his forehead to hers. “Well, ideally you forgive me and we go back to where we were.”

“Back to where we were? Meaning fake boyfriend and girlfriend?” She had gone stiff in his arms, and Sawyer knew it wasn’t going to be enough.

“That part is definitely negotiable,” he said thickly. His eyes had drifted to her lips and he was finding it more and more difficult to stay on topic when all he wanted to do was kiss and make-up. “But the bodyguard part is not.”

“And what about your worry that you’re too close? If we renegotiate the relationship, how will that make you feel?” Her fingers were toying with the collar on his T-shirt and driving him absolutely crazy.

“I...” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I can’t think when you’re touching me like that.”

“Good,” she breathed before tilting up her chin and pressing her lips to his.

This woman is going to be the death of me. Sawyer pulled her in tight and proceeded to take over the kiss. Kinsley might have initiated it, but he wasn’t about to let her end it. Over and over, he used his mouth to show her how he felt. He was far from ready to confess his love, but there was no point in denying there was something decidedly tangible between them. Any person walking on the street would be able to see it, and Sawyer was tired of denying it. The hard part came in knowing how to handle everything going forward. *How can I have all this, but keep her safe at the same time? Someone is out to hurt her, and it’s my job to stop it*.

A throat cleared in the doorway and Sawyer immediately pulled back. “Good morning, Mr. Storm,” he said with a sheepish shrug. It wasn’t like he could deny what they’d been doing.

Kinsley was biting her lip to keep from laughing and Sawyer almost squeezed her side in retaliation. *Nice*. *Staying quiet and letting me take the heat*.

Mr. Storm was standing with his arms folded and an eyebrow raised high. “Are you two about done? The cool breeze from the open doorway was refreshing, but now the pancakes are cold and I’m pretty sure the neighbors have seen more than enough.”

Heat shot straight up Sawyer's neck and into his cheeks. Unlike the beautiful girl in his arms, his skin was light enough to show it all off and he knew he was an unflattering shade of red at the moment. *Idiot. Kissing her out in the open where anyone could see. You used to actually be good with women.*

"Just reestablishing our boyfriend, girlfriend status, Dad," Kinsley said with a grin. She stepped away from Sawyer and kissed her dad's cheek. "Rumors will fly and it'll only make it all look more real." She flounced inside, leaving Sawyer alone with her father.

Sawyer ducked his head and shoved his hands inside his front pockets. "I want to apologize, sir. It was wrong of me—"

Mr. Storm held up a hand for silence. When Sawyer complied, the older man put it down and spoke. "Have you apologized to her?"

Sawyer nodded.

"Are you going to actually protect her this time?"

Sawyer nodded again, this time more firmly.

"Do you have any plans to walk away and break her heart again?"

"No, sir," Sawyer growled, knowing a shake of the head was not enough.

Mr. Storm narrowed his gaze and studied the bodyguard. "I've made enough mistakes in my life to know we all need second chances, but not only is my daughter's heart on the line, so is her life. Harlan told me why he sent you back, and I'm glad he was able to talk some sense into you. I agree with him. No one will take Kinsley's life more seriously than the man who's in love with her. But I make no promise that there will be a third chance, so I suggest you make the most of this one."

Sawyer gave a curt nod, not bothering to deny his feelings for Mr. Storm's daughter. He wasn't proud of his earlier behavior, but he was ready to move past it. He'd learned his lesson and had no intention of screwing it up this time. "I understand."

Mr. Storm nodded and let Sawyer into the house. "We were just going to eat. Come join us and we'll discuss the incident at the show."

CHAPTER 13

Kinsley pulled the orange juice from the fridge and set it on the table, then took the chair next to Sawyer. Although they never finished their discussion of where their relationship stood, she wasn't about to be very far away from him.

In a far shorter time than she would have imagined, all the broken pieces were put back together. One part of her worried she was moving too fast, but the other part, the part that felt like it needed Sawyer in order to breathe properly, was not about to listen to her logical voice. *Love isn't logical,* she thought to herself. *And even though he didn't confess his love and I'm not ready to confess mine, he did admit that there's something between us,, and I think anyone passing by knows it, too*. She almost giggled at the thought of anyone seeing them kiss, but Kinsley wisely held it back. *This is not the time to act like a loopy teenage girl. We have serious things to discuss*.

"I want to hear exactly what happened at the barn from your point of view," her father said as he poured syrup onto his stack of flapjacks. His eyes darted over to Sawyer, then back down to his food.

"There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary," Sawyer said after he'd swallowed. "I even ran back to check on things while Kins got ready to ride out." He scratched at his chin. "I ran into Tyrone and spoke to him for a moment, but I didn't see anything in his behavior that would implicate his participation."

Kinsley shook her head. "I told you Tyrone is harmless."

"No one is harmless," Sawyer muttered before filling his mouth with food.

"That's a pretty cynical point of view," Kinsley said with a frown. *What is it he's seen that would lead him to such a pessimistic lifestyle?*

Sawyer shrugged but didn't answer verbally.

"I would imagine you've seen some pretty difficult things in your lifetime," Kinsley's father said.

Sawyer nodded, his mouth still full.

"Do you still feel like this is an inside job?" her dad asked.

Sawyer nodded again, wiping his mouth on a napkin. "More than ever. That place is always buzzing with people. Someone would have seen something if there was an unauthorized individual poking around. I think there are far too many eyes around for a stranger to consistently get into Kinsley's thing."

"So who do you feel are your top suspects?" Garrett sat back in his seat, his eyes shrewd as he watched Sawyer.

Kinsley felt like she was watching a ping pong match, her eyes darting back and forth between her father and her...well, she didn't really know what he was at this point, but he was still her bodyguard. *Probably best to just keep thinking of him that way until our other matters are settled.*

"The same three I had from the beginning," Sawyer hedged. His eyes darted to hers, and she knew she wouldn't like who was on the list.

"Just say it," she said with a sigh. "I won't snap your head off."

Sawyer raised his eyebrows and his mouth moved into a crooked grin. The effect was so adorable that Kinsley wanted to jump into his lap for another heart-stopping kiss, but the presence of her father kept her from being so bold. "Mary Ann is one."

Garrett nodded. "She would have a lot to gain if Kinsley was out of the running."

"My thoughts exactly," Sawyer agreed. He looked at Kinsley again. "Coach Ritton is another."

Kinsley's jaw went slack. "What? Why? Why in the world would a coach sabotage his own student?"

Garrett folded his arms and tilted his head. "I agree. It doesn't make sense." He shook his head. "I don't see what Ritton would have to gain."

Sawyer shrugged. "I agree. I don't see either, but we know he had the time and the access, and right now I'm keeping that in mind."

Garrett pursed his lips and nodded. "Okay. Anyone else?"

"Just Tyrone," Sawyer admitted.

Kinsley rolled her eyes. "Again, we have no motive. What would Tyrone gain if I was out of commission?"

"And I still say that his crush on you might be enough," Sawyer argued. "Grown men who allow people like Ritton to beat them down all the time often have repressed emotions and feelings. Tyrone's possessive feelings for you might be just the thing to give him an outlet."

"You're wrong," Kinsley stated firmly. "People have little crushes all the time, and they don't go around nearly killing the people they like."

Sawyer shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you, but those are the three I'm keeping my eyes on." He sat back, the picture of confidence. "Mary Ann was there when I was helping you, but I never saw Tyrone." He squished his lips to one side. "I'll be interested to hear what the police dig up when they're finished interrogating all of them."

"You're not going to do it?" Kinsley asked.

"We don't want to blow my cover," Sawyer responded, leaning forward again to eat some more. "And if any of my firm did it, the name Lockwood would probably come up, so it's best to let the police run that and just pass us the info."

She nodded and watched her dad do the same. Kinsley's appetite was gone and she pushed her food around her plate. The thought of any of those people wishing to hurt her made her sick to her stomach.

Mary Ann is a spoiled brat, but to poison me? It just seems so...unreal. Who actually does that? And Coach. I know he's cranky, but we've worked together for a lot of years. And we're so close to nationals at this point. It just doesn't make sense. But that leaves sweet Tyrone. He wouldn't hurt a fly, I'm just sure of it. So what if he has a crush? Lots of people have crushes. It doesn't mean anything in the long run.

"I can see you thinking," Sawyer said with a grin.

Kinsley pushed her plate away and sat back in her chair. "I'm just...sad, I guess. The thought that any of those people would be mad enough or...crazy enough to pull something like they did just blows my mind." She raised her hands, palms up. "I've never done anything to hurt any of them. I mean, I can't say I haven't snipped at Mary Ann a few times, but for the most part, I at least try to be civil." She shook her head, tears starting to prick in the back of her eyes. "I just don't get it. Why would anyone do this?"

SAWYER REACHED OUT and wrapped one arm around Kinsley, pulling her into his side. "You can't think of it that way," he said softly against the side of her head. "This isn't about you or what you've done. When a person gets to the point where they are purposefully hurting others, it's about them.

Them and only them. They aren't thinking rationally anymore. While they might not technically be insane, they have lost touch with reality to the point that they don't feel the rules apply to them and they have the right to do whatever they want to get whatever they want." He pressed a kiss to her temple, holding back a chuckle when she sighed and melted into him. "So as dumb as it sounds, you can't take this personally."

"You're right," she said softly. "That does sound dumb."

Sawyer huffed and chuckled. When Mr. Storm stood up to leave the room, Sawyer gave him a respectful nod.

Kinsley tilted her head up. "So now what?"

"What do you mean?" Sawyer asked with a frown.

She sat up, taking her warmth with her, and stared Sawyer in the eyes. "Where does this leave you and me? I know you're my bodyguard again, but out on the porch, you said you have feelings for me."

Sawyer nodded slowly. He wasn't sure he was ready to discuss what he'd admitted on the porch, but if having a younger sister had taught him anything, it was that girls wanted it all. They didn't like waiting and wondering. *Might as well get this over with*. "I wasn't lying. I find myself feeling too much for you."

She grinned mischievously. "Oh yeah? How many of those things involve anger and frustration?"

Sawyer barked out a laugh. "Probably just as many as involve warmth and desire," he shot back.

Kinsley's eyes went soft and she glanced down at her lap. "I'll admit the feelings are mutual," she admitted, glancing at him from under her lashes.

While that helped Sawyer feel better about spillings his guts to her, he knew this next part wasn't going to be received as well. "But I don't think we should do anything about it...yet."

Her face jerked upright. "What? Why?"

"Kins," he said softly, grabbing her hands in his. "I know you haven't forgotten what happened yesterday," he started. "You were sent to the hospital, all because I was distracted."

She pulled her hands back. "It has nothing to do with you being distracted, Sawyer," she argued. "You were doing your job. In fact, if I recall correctly, you pushed me aside and were standing guard while I ate."

"And all the while, the danger was inside the stall," he countered.

She threw up her hands. "But how could we have known that?"

"If I'd been keeping an eye on things better, *I* would have known that."

"You can't be there twenty-four-seven!" Kinsley tilted her head, her eyes pleading with him. "You can't blame yourself for this. I don't blame you. No one blames you. The sabotaging jerk managed to do something when we weren't looking." She folded her arms and pursed her lips. "Besides, you're becoming well-known enough around the barn that if you had been lurking about, the bad guy probably wouldn't have struck."

Sawyer couldn't help but chuckle. "Lurking about? Bad guy? Struck? You sound like you're quoting a cartoon or something."

She grinned back. "Or something. Maybe I read too many old mystery novels."

"The point is, there was no way for any of us to predict the jump from theft to poisoning," Garrett said from the doorway, where he leaned one shoulder against the wall.

Sawyer rubbed the back of his head. "There's got to be a way to see what's going on when we're not there. I could always have Roman or Ridge come install a camera, but I'm afraid that the person doing it will see them." He made a face. "Ridge looks just like me." He winked at Kinsley. "But less handsome." He smiled when she snorted. "And Roman is huge. Like, huge. He makes me look weak."

Kinsley's eyes were wide. "Really?"

Sawyer nodded. "He's hard to hide."

Garrett's lips pinched into a thin white line. "Maybe we could sneak in one night? There's one last show next week before nationals. She has enough points from her Class A show to move onto regionals. We're hoping she can win and be done. The—" he glanced at Kinsley with a grin "—bad guy has only attacked at shows. Perhaps we could get special permission to get into our stall before everyone else shows up?"

Sawyer leaned back. "That's a thought. If the camera was already there, we could just go about our business as normal. I'd still like to have one here at home, if possible." He tilted his head. "Could you talk to the owner of the club?"

Garrett nodded. "Consider it done."

Sawyer took a deep breath. "Then I guess all we do now is wait." He knew he and Kinsley hadn't exactly figured out their relationship, but Sawyer figured it was best for now to leave it be. *I need to focus, and I can't do that if we change anything at this point. She already has me tied in*

knots. He glanced at the beauty beside him. *I need to save her. Then I can have her.*

CHAPTER 14

Kinsley smiled as Amadeus' lips tickled her palm as he took the apple from her hand. "You did so good today. Yes, you did," she crooned while rubbing his muzzle. Grabbing his face, she kissed his forehead. "You're my favorite boy, aren't you?"

"I can't believe I'm jealous of a horse," came a wry reply from behind her.

Kinsley spun with a smile, knowing full well who the voice belonged to. Ever since last week's incident, things had been better between her and Sawyer. While he still held barriers between them, she felt like he had become much more steady in his response to her, rather than the chaotic leaps of hot and cold from before. She boldly studied him as he rested his arms over the top of the gate. "Jealousy looks good on you," she said flirtatiously.

Sawyer's eyebrows shot up and a smirk tugged at his lips. He glanced up and down the walkway, then silently opened the gate and slipped inside. "Excuse me, Amadeus," he whispered, stepping between her and the horse. Reaching out, he caged her against the gate with an arm on either side. "Are you saying you like the way I look?" he asked in a low, husky voice.

"Maybe," Kinsley hedged, loving the electricity sparking through the air. She barely breathed, hoping and praying that he would kiss her the way he had last week when they'd finally admitted their feelings were real. They had shared a couple of public pecks since then, but nothing like the earth-shattering ones Sawyer was capable of.

Sawyer leaned in and rubbed his nose along her cheek. "I like the way you look, too," he whispered. "But not necessarily the way you smell."

He laughed when Kinsley squeaked in protest and shoved at his chest, barely pushing him back. *Geez, he's like a rock! I don't even want to know how much he must work out to get that way.* "And just how do I smell?" she shot back, knowing full well she reeked of horse.

"Like the beast behind me," Sawyer said, still grinning. He looked over his shoulder. "No offense, bud. But it's not exactly a ladylike scent."

Amadeus snorted and nibbled at Sawyer's hair, causing Kinsley to laugh, while Sawyer scowled and pushed the horse away. "Well..." She sauntered around Sawyer and burrowed into Amadeus' shoulder. "This guy doesn't care what I smell like. He likes me just the way I am."

Amadeus nodded his head up and down as if he understood every word, and Sawyer shook his head. "I give up!" he put his hands in the air. "I can't compete against a horse, apparently."

"I'd take you over the horse any day," came a sultry reply from behind the gate.

Kinsley's lips pinched together as both she and Sawyer turned to look at Mary Ann standing in the walkway.

The brazen girl winked at Sawyer. "Why don't you come see what kind of a reception you'd get at my stall?"

Sawyer stepped back until he was even with Kinsley on the other side of Amadeus' neck. "Thanks anyway, but I kinda like it in here."

Mary Ann pushed her lips out into a large pout and walked up to the gate. "You sure? My stall can be much more...fun."

"I'm sure," came Sawyer's monotone reply.

"If you change your mind, be sure and let me know." Mary Ann stepped a little closer, raising herself onto the bottom rung of the gate. "And you too, beautiful boy," she crooned at Amadeus in a baby voice. She reached out to rub his nose. "When you get tired of that big Amazon riding you, you come on over and let Mary Ann take care of you, okay?" Bouncing down from the gate, she gave a little wave and flounced off toward her own horse.

"What the heck was that about?" Sawyer asked, his tone bewildered.

Kinsley looked heavenward and shook her head. "She's been after Amadeus for years," Kinsley grumbled, grabbing a brush and starting at the horse's flank. "He's worth quite a bit of money in the horse market, and Mary Ann is always looking for a way to get ahead." Amadeus stomped his foot and Kinsley pulled back, realizing she was brushing pretty harshly. "Sorry." She patted his back before continuing. "She goes through horses and coaches like water, always believing the next one will help take her to the top."

Sawyer's brows furrowed as he watched her over Amadeus' back. "Her motive just keeps getting stronger and stronger. I wish the police had been able to break her alibi."

Kinsley sighed. “I know. But I still struggle to feel like she would go so far as to attack me. She wants to win, but I don’t think she’d take me out to do it. She might, however, spend every penny her father has to do it.”

Sawyer huffed. “Sounds like she already does that.”

“Oh, she does. Believe me.”

“But I would venture to say most of you in this sport are spending Daddy’s money,” Sawyer said, his tone resigned, causing Kinsley to frown.

“What kind of a comment is that?” she snapped. “And why in the world would it matter to you?”

Sawyer sighed and rubbed his hands down his face. “It doesn’t. I’m sorry. And it’s wrong to assume everyone here is a spoiled, rich kid.” His bright blue eyes were full of remorse when they met hers. “You’ve proven me wrong multiple times, and you’d think I’d learn to let it go.”

“You’d think,” she grumbled. She fought the temptation to defend herself. Her father hadn’t been paying for any of her lifestyle for many years. Between her modeling contract and winnings, Kinsley was completely self-sufficient. *I don’t have to defend myself. He needs to get off his ‘rich people are terrible’ soapbox and realize people are who they are.*

“I’m sorry.”

Sawyer’s voice caused her to jump and spin around. In her frustration, she hadn’t heard him walk around Amadeus and come up directly behind her. Now he was standing extremely close and her rapid heart beat had very little to do with the small scare he’d given her. “I-it’s okay,” she quickly stammered, backing up into Amadeus’ side.

He shook his head and stepped even closer. “No, it’s not. It was a rotten thing to say, let alone think. I’m not even really sure where the attitude comes from.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We weren’t wealthy growing up, but we weren’t hurting, by any means. And my sister married into a family of billionaires who are really good men.” He shrugged. “I really have no excuse, other than my sour attitude, I guess.”

Kinsley’s anger faded, but the hurt still remained. “I just don’t get why you would think that about me. I thought you knew me better than that.”

“I do,” Sawyer said softly. “But I’ve also spent way too many hours playing security at events where rich idiots flaunt their assets like it’s some kind of game to them.” He shook his head. “It’s colored my view, I guess.” His eyes roamed her face. “I meant it when I said you’ve proven me

wrong." He brought his hand up and trailed a knuckle down her cheek. "You've opened my eyes to so much more than I ever thought possible."

Kinsley felt her body straining to move forward, but she held back. She'd initiated their last kiss and needed him to make the first move. The air felt thick and heavy, thrumming with anticipation, and it was all she could do to remain still as he slowly lowered his head.

Just as their lips brushed, Amadeus shifted behind her, knocking Kinsley back a step.

"WHOA," SAWYER SAID, catching Kinsley by the arms. He gave a resigned grin. "I think I need to stop cornering you in the stall. It always leads to distractions." *And disappointment,* he thought. *That's twice I've almost kissed her when I should be working.*

Kinsley wasn't paying any attention to him. Instead, her focus was on Amadeus. She had turned and put her hand on the horse's belly.

"What's wrong?" Sawyer asked. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. The horse had stomped his feet a couple of times and his breathing was loud, but it just looked normal to Sawyer.

"He's swelling," Kinsley murmured. She watched the large animal shift and stomp his foot again. "Please, no."

Concern immediately slammed into Sawyer. "What is it?"

Kinsley's dark, misty eyes met his. "I think he's getting sick. It could be colic, but I don't know for sure. Can you go find Coach?"

Sawyer nodded and hurried for the gate and flagged down a worker. "Go get Coach Ritton immediately!"

The girl nodded and turned to run.

Sawyer came back by Kinsley's side just as Amadeus began to throw his head around, stomping across the stall.

"What are you doing?" Kinsley asked loudly. Her voice betrayed her panicked emotions. "I need you to go get Coach."

Sawyer held up his hands. "I sent a worker to find him. I didn't want to leave you."

Her face crumpled and a few tears trickled down her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered thickly. She moved around to meet Amadeus head on. "Hey, boy," she said soothingly. "Help is on the way, okay?"

Amadeus snorted and moved backward, then forward again, and Sawyer pulled Kinsley out of the way. “He’s gonna trample you if you’re not careful.” Sawyer slowly pushed Kinsley behind his back, keeping his eyes on the restless animal.

“Addy would never hurt me,” Kinsley said softly from behind his back.

“Your Addy wouldn’t,” Sawyer stated. “But right now, he’s not himself.”

“Which is exactly why I need to see what’s wrong.” She tried to step around Sawyer, but he caged her in.

“Kins, my job is to protect you, and right now it’s from an animal instead of a human. Hang tight, and when Ritton gets here, we’ll see what’s going on.”

To her credit, Kinsley sighed, but didn’t argue.

“What’s going on?” Ritton’s voice boomed down the concrete walkway as his heavy footsteps grew louder. “Storm?” he called.

“She’s in here,” Sawyer answered, still keeping an eye on the shifting horse. “Something’s wrong with Amadeus.” When Ritton’s head became visible over the gate, Sawyer nodded toward the unruly horse.

Ritton’s thick brows furrowed and he opened the gate, careful to only leave enough room to get inside. Amadeus snorted and threw his head around, backing up and walking forward again.

Sawyer couldn’t see what was happening as Ritton had gone to the opposite side of the animal. “Any ideas?” he called over.

Ritton stood up, his face serious. “Storm, where’s your halter? I think he’s got colic.”

Before he could stop her, Kinsley had rushed around Sawyer and was grabbing her equipment. “Come on, boy,” she said through her tears. “It’s gonna be okay.” Slowly, she raised the halter, moving around to capture Amadeus’ moving head. “Shh...it’s okay.”

Sawyer slowly moved in behind her, ready to push her to the side at a moment’s notice if the horse became aggressive. “What does it mean, he has colic?” he asked in an aside to Ritton.

Ritton took off his hat and scratched his head. “It basically means he has a belly ache, but it’s more severe than that.” Ritton shook his head and slapped his hat back on. “If it’s severe enough, a horse can die from it.”

A broken sob came through Kinsley’s lips and Sawyer put his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ll get it all figured out.” He

aimed his voice back at Ritton. “What can be done?”

“We’ll get the vet called in, but we need to get Amadeus outside and start walking him.” Ritton shook his head. “It’s the best way to help.”

Sawyer nodded. Kinsley had finally managed to get the halter on, but Sawyer didn’t trust the horse at the moment. *Anything in pain is likely to become violent, whether animal or human*. He had too many experiences with that to ignore. “Here.” He took the lead rope from Kinsley’s shaking hands. “You tell me where to go,” he said softly, urging Kinsley to leave ahead of him.

“Okay, you need to be on his left.” Her head bobbed and she opened the gate wide. “Come on out here. We’ll walk to the outside arena.”

Sawyer nodded, moved to the horse’s left side, and began to tug on Amadeus’ ropes. “Come on, boy. Let’s go for a walk. We’re gonna help you feel better.”

At first the horse was resistant, but after a moment of tug of war, he gave in and moved out of the stall. His movements were jerky and skittish, but he followed Sawyer’s lead.

Sawyer continued to talk in a low voice to him, doing his best to stay calm and praying they could save the animal. *If Kinsley loses this horse, it’ll kill her.* His mind whirled as they made their way down the hallway. *But how did this happen? How does a horse go from being completely healthy to suddenly sick? Has our saboteur hit again? He’s never done anything at home before. Only at shows.*

Sawyer nodded and gave Kinsley a small, reassuring smile as they moved into the sunlight. Amadeus jerked back, but Sawyer held firm, eventually making their way into the paddock.

“He has to keep moving,” Ritton shouted from the side. “Don’t let him lay down. Just keep going at an easy pace.”

Sawyer nodded his understanding and began to move around the fenced area in a circle. A crowd was gathering, but he ignored them. “Nice and easy, boy. Nice and easy.” Sawyer turned himself and walked at Amadeus’ side, patting his neck. “This isn’t going to be fun, but we’re doing it for Kinsley, all right? She loves you, and it’ll break her heart if something happens to you. So we’re gonna keep moving for her, okay?”

The horse turned his head slightly, and Sawyer could have sworn the horse nodded.

“Okay. Glad we understand each other.” Sawyer nodded back, ignoring the feeling of idiocy that came from talking to an animal. “Here we go.”

CHAPTER 15

Kinsley chewed on the inside of her lip to try and keep her tears in check, but it wasn't working very well. She kept angrily wiping away the strays that were leaking down her cheeks.

"Hang in there, girlie," Coach Ritton said roughly, rubbing his large hand on her back. They were standing next to each other on the outside of the fence, watching Sawyer walk a still agitated Amadeus around the paddock.

Kinsley nodded, not trusting her voice to speak.

"That man you got there," Ritton jerked his chin toward Sawyer. "He's a good one."

"Yeah...he is," Kinsley agreed. She had been frantic when she'd realized what was going on with Amadeus. Her hands had been shaking so hard, she could barely hold onto the halter, let alone lead her beloved horse out to the paddock. And then Sawyer had stepped up.

His calm, warm presence had been exactly what she needed. Kinsley knew that Sawyer wasn't overly fond of horses, but he had taken the lead and was now out there walking with her horse and helping keep him alive. If she hadn't known before, Kinsley was sure of it now. Her heart definitely belonged to the sensitive bodyguard. *Now I just have to convince him we can make it work between us*.

Kinsley rested her arms on top of the wooden fence and put her chin on top. "I just don't understand how this happened," she murmured.

"What has he had to eat lately?" Ritton asked gruffly.

Kinsley jerked upright. "I fed him an apple not too long ago," she said in a panic. "But I feed him apples after almost every practice. Just one." Her eyes darted back to her friend, and her tears began anew. "Could that have done this?" A pinch in her chest grew stronger and stronger until she couldn't breathe.

"Not likely," Ritton snapped with a huff. "A single apple isn't enough to hurt a horse, not unless you gave him a whole barrelful."

"No, just the one," Kinsley said, brushing her tears.

Ritton shook his head. “He had to have gotten into something.”

“Ritton.”

Kinsley and her coach turned at the voice. “Doctor Wendt.” Coach Ritton stepped forward and shook the vet’s hand. “Thank you for coming.”

“Dr. Wendt,” Kinsley breathed in relief.

“Kinsley!” The older man took her hand and patted it. “Don’t you worry, hon. We’ll get your beautiful animal taken care of.”

“Thank you,” she said thickly. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

The vet turned toward the paddock and peered through his glasses. “Who’s that handsome man walking Amadeus around?”

“That’s Sawyer,” Kinsley explained. “My...boyfriend.”

Dr. Wendt glanced over with a raised eyebrow. “Well, well, well. Looks like you picked a fine one. He looks like he could bench press the horse instead of walk it around.”

Kinsley smiled and barked out a laugh. “He probably could.”

Dr. Wendt winked and headed over to the gate. “Just give me a few minutes,” he said over his shoulder.

Kinsley watched as the doctor walked around to meet up with Sawyer and Amadeus. The two men spoke for a minute, and then Dr. Wendt began to move around the horse. He felt Amadeus’ belly and walked around, looking at the horse’s eyes and ears before going back to his stomach again.

Amadeus was still skittish, and he shifted sideways as the vet pushed around. Kinsley held her breath, praying that Dr. Wendt would be able to see what was going on.

A minute later, he turned to Sawyer, spoke, and sent the man and horse on their way. The vet stood still and watched them for a moment before coming back to the side of the paddock where Coach Ritton and Kinsley waited.

“It’s just as you thought, Josiah,” Dr. Wendt said as he got close. “He’s suffering from some colic.” Dr. Wendt turned and narrowed his gaze at the horse. “I think a good walk will be enough. He’s not overly bloated, though he is skittish, telling me there’s some pain involved.”

“Any idea what might have caused it?” Coach Ritton asked.

Dr. Wendt looked at Kinsley and Coach and shrugged. “Could be any number of things. More than likely, it was something he ate.”

“I fed him an apple,” Kinsley said softly. She knew Coach Ritton had said that wasn’t enough, but she still feared that she had had a hand in

hurting her beloved animal.

Dr. Wendt shook his head. “It would take much more than a single apple to hurt a horse like that.”

She let out a long sigh of relief. “But if that wasn’t it, what could it be? He and I have been training today, so there wasn’t time for him to get into anything. And I’ve only fed him the normal grain he usually gets. I can’t think of anything out of the ordinary that would have caused him to become sick.”

Dr. Wendt rubbed his chin, his lips pursed. “Could be you were sent some bad feed. Should take a look at it.” He tilted his head back and forth. “Or, someone fed him something without you knowing it.”

Kinsley stiffened. *Oh no. It couldn’t be. Could the person after me have hurt Addy?* Tears once again filled her eyes. *They’ve never done anything while we were at home before. Why now? Why—* Her thoughts cut off. “Mary Ann,” she growled.

Coach Ritton frowned. “What now?”

Kinsley’s chest began to heave and her fists clenched so hard, she cut off the blood supply to her fingers. “That...tramp came by earlier and was nuzzling Amadeus while flirting with Sawyer.” She shook her head. “She had to have done something to him.” Kinsley spun and began searching for the offender.

“HOLD IT!” Coach Ritton shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders. “You can’t just haul off half-cocked and accuse someone.” He scowled at her. “Mary Ann and her father are respected members of this club and have been for many years. She’s never done anything questionable before, and we’re not about to just send the police her way.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Coach Ritton said harshly, squeezing her shoulders for emphasis. “Let’s talk this out before we go accusing people.” He let go of her, but stayed close as if waiting to see if she would bolt. When she didn’t move, he asked, “Now, what proof do you have that she’s involved?”

“Get Sawyer,” Kinsley said through her clenched teeth, pointing to the man still walking in the paddock. “He was there, too.”

Coach Ritton raised an eyebrow. “Okay.” He nodded slowly. “We’ll get someone to walk the horse, and then we three will have a chat.”

SAWYER SCOWLED WHEN Tyrone started walking across the dirt to meet up with him. *What's he doing?* Although Sawyer had promised Kinsley he would be kind to Tyrone, he still didn't trust the guy. There was just something about him that made Sawyer uneasy, even if he couldn't pin any of the problems on the stable worker.

"Coach asked me to take over," Tyrone said, keeping his head ducked. "He wants to talk to you and Kinsley."

Sawyer frowned. "Did he say what it was about?"

Tyrone shook his head, then reached out and took the reins. The movement must have startled Amadeus, because he shied back and tugged hard, nearly knocking Tyrone off his feet.

"Whoa, boy!" Sawyer called, grabbing the leading ropes again. Amadeus snorted and stomped, but didn't pull again. "That's it. Easy." Sawyer put his hand out and slowly approached the horse, rubbing Amadeus' muzzle. "That's it," he crooned. "Tyrone here is going to walk you around to help you feel better, all right?"

Amadeus snorted and shifted to the side.

Yeah...the feeling's mutual, buddy. Sawyer closed his eyes and shook his head. *I can't believe I'm talking to a horse and pretending that he understands me*. "Listen." Sawyer stepped up close and whispered in the large animal's ear. "I know he's a little weird, but you need to keep moving or else you're gonna be sick, and I need to go talk to Coach." He looked into Amadeus' large black eye. "Can you handle him for just a few minutes?"

A resigned-sounding sigh seemed to come from Amadeus' mouth and he began to walk forward.

Sawyer held back a chuckle at the horse's antics. *No wonder Kinsley treats him like she does. He really is human-like*. "Okay." Sawyer carefully handed the lead to Tyrone. "Just walk nice and easy. We don't want to tire him out, but he needs to keep moving."

"I know what I'm doing," Tyrone snipped, then immediately ducked his head. "Got it. Thanks," he said quickly, then tugged and began walking away.

Sawyer watched them go, the red flags in his mind still screaming. But what could he do? Other than a gut feeling, he had absolutely no evidence that Tyrone had done anything wrong. *We've really got to get those cameras up,* he thought. He'd put in the call to Roman, but they were working on the

cameras at the show first, believing it to be the most important since nothing had happened at home yet.

So much for that, he grumbled as he walked over to Kinsley and Coach Ritton. Kinsley's face was a mask of anger, and Sawyer wondered what had happened. "What's going on?" he asked as he approached.

"To my office," Coach said, tilting his head toward one of the buildings. "We need to talk."

Climbing over the fence, Sawyer easily fell in line beside Kinsley. "Hey. You okay?" He reached out to grab her hand, but she snatched hers away. The rejection hurt far worse than Sawyer wanted it to, but he knew she was upset, so he tried not to take it personally.

"No, I'm not okay. Someone hurt my horse," she snapped.

"You're positive another person did this? It isn't just 'one of those things' that happens to horses?"

Kinsley spun on him. "No! This doesn't just 'happen to horses'," she spat. "He had to have eaten something bad or too much of something in order to cause this. Since he's not roaming a pasture where he can get into something he shouldn't, it had to have been done by a person."

Sawyer held up his hands. This was a side of Kinsley he'd never seen before. Although she always stuck up for the underdog, she'd never been quite so volatile before. "I didn't mean anything by it," Sawyer reassured her. "I know absolutely nothing about horses. I was just asking a question."

Kinsley took in a deep breath, then collapsed against him, burying her face in his chest.

Sawyer was slightly hesitant to move, but he eventually wrapped his arms around her. "It's gonna be okay," he murmured into her hair. "It's gonna be okay."

"I know," she sniffled. "But it doesn't feel like it." She straightened and wiped the tears from her already swollen eyes. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. You've been wonderful during this, but I'm just so..." She shook her head. "So angry! How in the world could someone do this to him?" She waved her arm toward the fence where Tyrone was still walking Amadeus. "He's never hurt a soul! He's completely innocent, and yet our criminal risked his life."

"Criminal, huh?" Sawyer wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her toward Ritton's office. "What happened to bad guy?"

Kinsley snorted and wiped at her cheeks again. “I’m not so sure it’s a guy.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Oh yeah? Who do you think it was?”

“Mary Ann,” she ground out. “You remember, she was there right before he got sick.”

Sawyer nodded. “I do, but I didn’t see her slip him anything. Did you?”

Kinsley looked over and glared. “I’m not in the mood to be rational right now, Sawyer. I want to be mad. Someone hurt my baby and they deserve to pay.”

“I know, but we need to make sure it’s the right someone.”

She sighed and leaned into him as they walked. “I’m sure you’re right, but I still think she’s involved.”

“She could be. We definitely know she has motive and opportunity.”

Slipping her left arm around his waist, Kinsley whispered. “Thank you.”

Sawyer squeezed her shoulder. “That’s what boyfriends are for,” he joked.

Kinsley stopped moving. “Is that really what you are? My boyfriend?” she whispered so Coach wouldn’t hear.

Sawyer paused and thought over his words carefully. These past couple weeks had shown him over and over again how much Kinsley had snuck into his heart. They’d already acknowledged they were interested in each other, but had never fully defined their relationship, other than the fake one. Is that what he wanted? To be her real boyfriend? Could he do that and still protect her? “There’s only one thing I want more than to be your real boyfriend, Kins,” he said softly, wrapping his arms around her waist.

She frowned and resisted his embrace. “What are you talking about?”

Slowly, he lowered his forehead to hers, taking in a deep breath of that animal and barn smell that she always seemed to carry on her. “I’m falling for you, Kins. There’s no denying it, and I desperately want us to be together. The only thing sweeter than that would be to catch the person who is determined to ruin your life.” He straightened and kissed her forehead. “I won’t deny my feelings for you, but until the...bad guy is caught, I can’t give you more than that. I won’t risk losing you because I’m blinded by you.”

CHAPTER 16

Kinsley was equal parts elated and frustrated with Sawyer's words. Knowing he wanted a relationship beyond this case was amazing! Knowing he wanted to wait until she was out of danger was depressing. *I get it. I really do. But we've already struggled to set aside our attraction, and I'm tired of it.* She sighed as she sat down in a chair across from Coach Ritton. *Doesn't really matter if I'm tired of it, does it? Addy is hurt and someone is trying to stop me from showing. Sawyer's right. Solving this problem has to come first.*

Coach sat down at his desk and leaned back with his arms folded over his chest. His bushy eyebrows were furrowed and his lips tugged down in a frown. "Why don't you tell me exactly what happened today?" He directed his question at Kinsley, but Sawyer jumped in.

"Sir, I think we need to start from the beginning."

Those thick brows shot up. "There's more than just today?" He narrowed his gaze and leaned forward onto his desk. "Does this have anything to do with you getting sick the other day?"

Kinsley nodded. "We think so."

Coach huffed and shoved a hand through his thinning hair. "Just what I need," he grumbled. Blowing out a long breath, he settled back again. "Go ahead. Might as well tell it all."

For the next several minutes, Sawyer explained the entire situation, answering any questions that Coach had along the way. When they were done, there was silence in the room.

"You mean to tell me that someone has been sabotaging you for the last few months, and you never said anything?" he growled at Kinsley.

She shrugged and looked to Sawyer for help. *Just how much can I say here?*

Sawyer must have understood her unspoken question because he answered for her. "To be honest, sir, you were on the suspect list."

"I..." Coach's eyes were wide as dinner plates. "I was a suspect?" He made a face and shook his head. "After all our years together, you think I

would purposefully hurt you?"

Kinsley was shocked to hear a note of betrayal in his voice. For a man who had a reputation for being a brute, it was surprising to note that he actually cared what people thought of him. "I..." She had no words of comfort for him. "I'm sorry," she finally murmured.

"The list was mine," Sawyer said, stepping in and saving Kinsley. He met Coach Ritton glare for glare. "While we weren't sure of your motive, you were one of the few who definitely had the opportunity and easy access to pull this off." Sawyer shrugged unapologetically. "I have to look at things from all angles. And that included you."

"So you were never her boyfriend?" Coach clarified. "You're her bodyguard?"

Sawyer's gorgeous blue eyes met hers, and the warmth in them was intoxicating. "For now," he said, answering Coach's question. When his gaze left her, Kinsley felt oddly cold and she wrapped her arms around herself.

Coach humphed and settled back. "You must have taken me off your list if you're telling me all this now," he pointed out. "What changed?"

"The horse," Sawyer admitted. "I honestly don't believe you would hurt the horse."

"We can't prove *anyone* hurt the horse," Coach said firmly. His eyes drifted to Kinsley. "Despite people's opinions."

Kinsley felt the anger she'd been nurturing earlier bubble up again. "Mary Ann has never made a secret of wanting me out of the way, and today she was flirting with Sawyer and talking to Addy."

"That doesn't mean she did something to him." Coach sat forward and clasped his hands on top of the desk. "Why would she hurt the very thing she covets? Hurting you seems plausible, but hurting Amadeus seems idiotic. She wants him alive."

"Maybe she's reached a point where she'll do anything to stop me from winning." Kinsley pointed a finger at the coach. "We both know I have a better chance at nationals than she does. Maybe her jealousy is getting out of control."

Coach tilted his head back and forth. "It's possible, but I still don't think it makes sense." He looked back at Sawyer. "Who else is on this list of yours?"

Sawyer glanced quickly at Kinsley and she turned away, knowing exactly who he was about to say. “Tyrone.”

Once again, those eyebrows shot up. “Tyrone? The pathetic, little man who barely talks?”

You mean the one who can’t talk because you always bowl him over? Kinsley took a deep breath. Her emotions were completely out of control, and it was making her say and think things she normally wouldn’t. *You’ve got to keep a cool head, Kins. Getting angry never helped anyone.*

“Your assistant, yes,” Sawyer said.

“The guy can barely put two words together to form a sentence. There’s no way he could pull off something like this,” Coach scoffed.

“He has time and access,” Sawyer pointed out.

“But what about motive? What could someone like him possibly gain from hurting Kinsley?” Coach asked in disbelief.

Sawyer shrugged. “I think he might have a hero complex.”

Kinsley shook her head. “Having a crush on me doesn’t mean anything,” she insisted. “Plus, he’s never been the one to come to my aid. You have.”

Sawyer nodded. “While that’s true, he definitely was not happy to see me show up. He still isn’t happy I’m here.”

“How do you know?” Kinsley frowned. “Has he said something to you?”

Sawyer shrugged, and Kinsley immediately grew suspicious. *What have those two said to each other that I don’t know about? Could the Tyrone I know really just be a facade?* “No,” she insisted. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I have to agree with Kinsley,” Coach said firmly. “Tyrone doesn’t have the brains to pull something like this off.”

SAWYER PUSHED A HAND through his hair. Despite their strong objections, he knew there was more to Tyrone than anyone realized. *I just can’t prove it yet.*

“Since we don’t have any real suspects,” Coach said, “I think the real question is, how do we stop this from happening again? Dr. Wendt said Amadeus will be fine, but a severe case of colic can kill an animal.

Whoever's doing these things isn't fooling around." He looked at Kinsley. "And my guess is, whatever you became sick with could have been fatal as well."

"Strychnine," she said softly.

Ritton cursed under his breath. "But you told everyone it was an allergic reaction."

"Because we didn't want our saboteur to feel threatened," Sawyer stated. "We need them to think they're winning. If they go into hiding, we'll never find them."

"They are winning!" Coach roared, waving a hand toward the barn. "I've got a sick horse over there as evidence."

"I'm aware of that," Sawyer said through clenched teeth. "We're doing the best we can, but so far gathering evidence has been difficult."

Ritton scrubbed his hands over his face. "So what's our next step? What are you planning to do?"

Sawyer glanced at Kinsley. "We were planning to put cameras in the stalls."

"I would think you would have done that first thing," Ritton grumbled.

Sawyer took a deep breath. His temper was not really in a good place right now to be dealing with the surly coach. He wanted to hold Kinsley and make sure she was okay. He wanted to beat the culprit to a pulp and be rid of this whole situation so he could move on with life and take things seriously with the woman he was falling for. Instead, he was dealing with a cranky coach, whom Sawyer was praying would be able to help them.

"Sneaking a camera into a busy horse barn isn't as easy as it sounds," Sawyer said dryly. "We've been in contact with the board of the regional's show and are working to get that taken care of, but that has been our first priority. Until today, the perp hadn't struck except during a show. Obviously, they changed things up."

"Which means what?" Kinsley asked softly.

Sawyer shrugged. "It could mean they're starting to get desperate. They feel threatened. They were out of other ideas." He shook his head. "It could mean any number of things. I think the only true takeaway here is that it's definitely someone who either works at or is a member of this club and that they don't want you to compete."

"Can we get that camera in soon?" Ritton asked.

Sawyer nodded. “Given the right circumstances. We have to do it when no one is around. Any of the workers could be a suspect, and if they see the camera, all bets are off. Plus, the men who install our cameras sort of...stand out. They’d definitely look suspicious to anyone who worked here.”

Ritton scratched his stubbly chin. “I’d say coming at night is your best bet, but the dogs are usually out and the barn hands sleep nearby. It might be better to come during dinner.” He looked directly at Sawyer. “I can keep the hands occupied while they eat if your men can work quickly.”

Sawyer pinched his lips. “I’ll talk to Ridge and Roman and see what they think. I don’t know how much it will take to get it installed. Twenty minutes might not be enough.”

“Anything is better than what we’ve got,” Kinsley said softly.

Sawyer nodded. “We’ll take care of it.”

“Meanwhile,” Ritton turned to Kinsley, “no picking fights or accusing anyone of anything. At this point, all you have are suspicions, and I still have a stable to run.”

Kinsley’s face tightened, but she nodded.

“Fine.” Ritton slammed his hands down on the desk. “Go do what you need to do.” He waved them away.

Kinsley quickly stood. “I want to go back to Amadeus.”

Sawyer joined her. “Come on. I’ll walk you back.” He held out his hand and was more excited than he should have been that Kinsley grasped it tightly. With a nod to the coach, Sawyer led them out of the office and out into the waning sunlight.

“Do you think they can get it all installed?” Kinsley whispered as they moved quickly across the grounds toward the corral.

“Ridge might be an idiot most of the time, but he’s good at what he does,” Sawyer assured her. “Between him and Roman, I’m sure they’ll get it all figured out.”

Kinsley nodded. When they came in sight of Amadeus, a quiet sob escaped her and she dropped Sawyer’s hand to run ahead.

Sawyer picked up his pace, but kept walking. He kept his eye on Tyrone, wanting to watch the young man’s reaction as they approached.

Tyrone’s smile was a mile wide as Kinsley approached them and climbed through the fence to rub down her beloved horse.

Amadeus nickered and bobbed his head up and down, greeting his owner.

“Are you feeling better, boy? Hmm?” Kinsley crooned, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Sawyer watched carefully as he approached. Tyrone kept his eyes on Kinley the whole time, completely ignoring Sawyer.

“He’s been much calmer for the last ten minutes or so,” Tyrone said. His smile was smug, but when his eyes darted to Sawyer’s approach, it faltered.

“How’s he doing?” Sawyer asked in Kinsley’s ear. He kept a watch on Tyrone through his periphery.

“Much better,” Kinsley said, the excitement in her voice palpable. “Dr. Wendt was right. Most of the time, a small case of colic can be gotten rid of by simply walking.” She buried her face in Amadeus’ mane. “I’m so glad you’re feeling better,” she whispered thickly.

Sawyer put his hand on her back and rubbed it in soothing circles. Despite his words earlier that they needed to keep things light until after the case was over, he was struggling. The need to protect her was going crazy, and touching her helped ease that desire.

Amadeus huffed and leaned over to nibble at Sawyer’s curls.

Sawyer waved him away. “I’m not ready to be bald yet, Addy. Knock it off.”

Kinsley giggled as she watched them. “It’s just his way of saying thank you.”

Sawyer smiled at her. “Thank you for what?”

“For being there when we needed you.” Her face became sober and a yearning appeared in her eyes.

Just as Sawyer was about to close the distance between them, a throat cleared.

“And thank you to you, too, Tyrone,” Kinsley said brightly. She reached out and patted his back. “I’m so grateful you were here.”

All the happiness Tyrone had shown earlier was gone. He kept his head ducked and handed the lead rope to Kinsley. “No problem. It’s what I’m here for.” Without waiting for a response, he turned and stalked out of the pen, disappearing into the barn.

Sawyer shook his head. “I’m telling ya, something is not quite right there.”

Kinsley sighed and laid her head on Amadeus. “I know,” she said. “But I just don’t see it.”

Sawyer took her hand and began leading them toward the gate. “Come on. Let’s get Addy settled and then get you taken care of. You look exhausted.”

“Gee, thanks,” she said sarcastically.

Sawyer glanced over his shoulder. “I didn’t say it detracted from your beauty, Kins. Take the comment for what it was, not how a girl would interpret it.”

“I *am* a girl,” she scowled.

“And a gorgeous one at that,” he stated, grinning when she suddenly became shy. “But you do look tired, and if we’re going to catch us a perp, we need to be firing on all cylinders.” He unlatched the gate and swung it wide. “If you’re feeling up to it, I’ll treat you to a casual dinner.”

Kinsley stopped and stared at him. “Even though we’re still fake?”

Sawyer met her gaze. “I wasn’t trying to say anything we had was fake, Kins,” he said softly. “There is nothing fake about how I feel about you. But I do think our relationship needs to stay where it is until this is over. I want nothing more than to hold you and forget the world, but not until you’re safe.” His eyes darted to the waiting horse. “And until Addy is safe.” He looked back to her. “Then we’ll see where we go.”

She watched him calmly for a moment. “You should know that I’m starving. I’ll probably eat a lot.”

A crooked grin pulled at his lips. “Sounds like my kind of woman.”

CHAPTER 17

Kinsley burst through her front door.

"Whoa! Where's the fire?" her father called out from down the hall. His footsteps hurried toward her.

"Sorry, Dad!" she said sheepishly. She closed the door much more gently than she had opened it. "I was in a hurry."

"Why?" He paused. "Have you been crying?" Her father's eyes widened. "What happened? Did you get hurt?" He hurried toward her, his eyes darting over her person.

"No, no." Kinsley shook her head, then swallowed the lump in her throat. Amadeus' illness still ached in her chest, but she was so grateful he was doing better. "We did have trouble, though." She took a deep breath. "Addy had colic."

Garrett's jaw dropped. "What? How? Did he get into something?"

She shook her head. "We think the saboteur fed him something."

"But...you weren't at a show! Why did they change things now?"

Kinsley nodded and flipped a stray hair out of her eyes. "I know. No one was expecting it. And really, we have no way to prove it. But how else would a horse whose diet is watched more closely than a swimsuit model's suddenly develop colic like that?"

He huffed and pushed a hand through his hair. "I agree that's the only thing that makes sense." His head jerked up. "Did Sawyer's men get the camera in yet?"

"No," she said softly. "They're working on getting it in at regionals. We thought our home turf was second priority."

Garrett cursed under his breath. "How did they know?" he muttered. "Or was it only a lucky break?"

Kinsley shrugged. "There's no way to know at this point."

"And no one saw anything?"

Kinsley frowned. "I'd been practicing with Addy for most of the afternoon. I'm really not sure when anyone would have slipped him

something. I fed him one apple like I always do after we finished, but Dr. Wendt and Coach both told me that wasn't enough to hurt him."

"And it isn't. There had to have been more." He sighed. "So what's the plan now?"

"Sawyer is contacting Ridge and Roman, and Coach is going to help us get the camera in."

"Ritton is in on it? So he's not a suspect anymore?"

"Sawyer doesn't think Coach would hurt Amadeus." Kinsley shrugged. "It's true. If he was out to get someone, he probably wouldn't do it through the horse."

Garrett nodded. "Makes sense. That would probably be akin to hurting himself."

Kinsley snorted. "Anyway, right now Sawyer is on his way to take me to dinner." She began to edge toward the stairs. "I was hoping to shower first."

Her father frowned. "You sure you want to go out? You look like you've had a rough day."

Kinsley gave him a look. "You and Sawyer! Geez! I'm a grown woman, Dad. I know when I need to rest."

He put up his hands. "Fine! Fine! I'll stay out of it." His eyes narrowed. "But before you go, do I need to give him *the talk*?"

"Please, no," she moaned. "We're both way too old for that, Dad."

"When a father finds his daughter making out on the front porch with a man, I think he's entitled to be curious."

Kinsley turned and started up the stairs. "You can be curious. You just don't get to interfere."

"We'll see about that!" he shouted as she walked down the hall.

Kinsley smiled and shook her head. *Now I have to take the world's fastest shower,* she thought to herself. She jumped into action, determined not to keep Sawyer waiting and to be able to spend as much time with him as possible. The walls between them were thinning and he had actually admitted out loud that he had feelings for her. Kinsley had high hopes that tonight, they could really talk about where they stood.

Despite her best efforts, it was over thirty minutes before she practically leapt down the stairs. *Cool it, girl. No matter what's going on, looking too eager will only make you look stupid. You're an adult. Act like it.*

Her scolding helped her slow down and walk like a lady, but it did nothing for her adrenaline and heart rate, both of which felt like they were soaring through the roof.

As she came down the final few steps, she spotted Sawyer sitting in the great room with her father. Sawyer's handsome face immediately turned towards her and Kinsley had to remind herself to keep breathing.

Those bright blue eyes were so mesmerizing, and the smile that spread across his face only proved to make her heart beat even faster. *How can he do that to me with only a look?* She mentally shook her head. *I don't think I'm falling anymore. I think I'm completely gone. Hook, line, and sinker. Please, oh please, don't break my heart again.*

Sawyer stood and walked across the room, his eyes roving up and down her casual, but cute outfit. "You look great," he said, his voice slightly deeper than normal.

"You clean up pretty well yourself," Kinsley said softly.

"I trust I don't need to give you any kind of warning?" Kinsley's father called out from his place on the couch.

"Dad..." Kinsley moaned and put a hand to her forehead.

Sawyer chuckled. "I think you just did, sir," he remarked.

Her father stood and began to walk out of the room. "Then don't make me repeat it."

Sawyer nodded. "I'll take good care of her." His eyes went back to Kinsley's, and she had a fleeting thought that there was a deeper meaning in those words, but she wasn't confident enough to call him on it. "Ready?" Sawyer held out his hand.

"Ready," Kinsley responded, enjoying his large, warm grip.

He led her to the front door, then stepped aside and let her through first. Once they were outside, Sawyer rested his hand on her lower back and guided her toward the large, black SUV in the driveway.

Kinsley laughed lightly as she settled in.

"What?" Sawyer asked as he sat in his own seat.

"It's just so cliché," Kinsley said with a wide smile. "It's exactly what I expected the first time we went out. Bodyguard. Black SUV. Next thing I know, you'll be pulling out a pair of aviators."

"You mean like these?" Sawyer reached into a compartment on the ceiling and pulled out the exact glasses she was thinking of.

"Oh my gosh, yes!"

Sawyer grinned and slid them onto his face. “If you’re gonna talk the talk, you gotta walk the walk.”

Kinsley shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

SAWYER COULDN’T HELP his smile. The sound of Kinsley’s carefree laughter was a tonic to his soul. He had spent a lot of his adult life being weighed down by the pressures of the military. The stress, the worry, the duty...it had all served him well, but he hadn’t experienced a lot of times when he was able to feel light and free.

And yet, one smile from this gorgeous woman and I’m a new man. I don’t know how to keep resisting this. The feeling is addictive, and the more I’m with her, the more I want to be with her. How does Harlan keep himself away from Cora? He shook his head. *He obviously has much better self-control than I do.*

Sawyer’s heart ached as he thought of Harlan and what he had gone through during his time as a prisoner of war. The Harlan they had known had never returned, and not even bubbly Cora could get through to him. Anyone who had eyes could see that the perky redhead was in love with her boss, and Sawyer knew Harlan well enough to know that Harlan felt the same way. But for some reason, he held back, refusing to even acknowledge the attraction between them.

Secretly, the entire crew at Lockwood Industries was rooting for Cora to win. Sawyer just prayed she held out long enough for Harlan to finally come to his senses. *If he’s going to lecture me on taking my chance, he needs to follow his own advice.* He took a deep breath. *If only I wasn’t worried about hurting him by saying that.*

“So where are we going?” Kinsley asked.

Sawyer cleared his throat. “Would it be all right with you if we picked up take-out?”

Kinsley frowned. “Yeah. Of course. Where did you want to eat?”

Sawyer glanced over. He was a little nervous about the next proposal, but after confessing his feelings this afternoon, he felt like they needed some time alone. “I was hoping we could go back to my place and spend the evening together,” he said softly. He was grateful that Ridge was

married and no longer living with him because Ridge would have given Sawyer a terrible time about staying away for the evening.

Harlan, on the other hand, had stated that he had work to do anyway, and would spend time at the office so Sawyer could have the place to himself. A fleeting feeling of guilt had hit Sawyer at the thought that Harlan would be alone all evening, but then he'd remembered that Harlan had been the one to push Sawyer toward Kinsley. A simple, 'Thanks, man' had set the two brothers off on the right foot and now the Lockwood home was cleaned and emptied, waiting for Sawyer and Kinsley to arrive with their dinner.

Sawyer desperately wanted to watch Kinsley's reaction to his suggestion, but he forced himself to keep his eyes on the road. There was a silence for a few seconds, and he worried he was pushing her too far. *Maybe she's not as interested as I thought she was. Maybe she's not ready to spend time together like this.*

"I think that sounds wonderful," she finally answered.

When Sawyer glanced over, her eyes were shining and a small smile graced her beautiful lips. He couldn't help himself and reached over to intertwine their fingers, resting their hands on his thigh as he drove. "Do you like Greek? I know this great place that serves really good gyros."

"Love it," she responded.

Sawyer nodded and the car fell silent as he drove. This time, however, the silence wasn't uncomfortable. It felt easy and normal, as if they didn't need to make small talk in order to be together. It felt...right.

A half-hour later, they were pulling into Sawyer's driveway. "Hang on," he said, jumping out of his door and rushing around to hers. Pulling it open, he offered his hand.

"Such a gentleman," she teased, using his hand to step down from the large vehicle. Once on the concrete, she turned and grabbed their bags. "Better not forget the food," she said, holding it up.

Sawyer took it from her. "Absolutely not. I'm famished."

"I might not have any brothers, but if Amadeus is anything to go by, I've learned not to come between a man and his food," Kinsley teased.

Sawyer closed the passenger door, then leaned forward, using his arms to cage Kinsley in. He loved how tall she was, her eyes so close to his. He didn't have to duck or feel like he was going to break her with the wrong

move. “Are you comparing me to a horse?” he teased, closing the distance between them.

“Maybe,” she whispered back. Her eyes flickered between his eyes and lips, letting him know she felt the electricity flaring between them. “I’m sure you’ve heard the saying, ‘hungry as a horse’.”

Sawyer nodded slowly. “I have. And it’s probably truer than I care to admit.” He tilted his head to the side and rubbed their cheeks together. “But I have one thing Amadeus doesn’t.”

“Hmm...” Kinsley hummed, leaning into his touch. “And what’s that?”

“The opportunity to do this,” Sawyer breathed, bringing his face back so he could bring their lips together. Every time they kissed, Sawyer felt like it was the first time. His heart took off in a gallop and he felt his entire body come alive. He gripped the side of the car, forcing himself to keep the kiss lighter, even though he wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around Kinsley and never let her go.

The knowledge that she was becoming more important to him than anything else seemed to thrum through his body. But they were outside, where anyone could see them, and Sawyer also knew that he had to be careful until this case was over. *Falling in too deep could result in someone getting hurt, and I refuse to let that happen.*

With one last kiss, he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t usually have dessert first,” he said with a chuckle.

Kinsley smiled and shrugged. “They say life is short. Might as well enjoy what you can.”

Sawyer laughed and stepped back, taking the bag of food and her hand. “Come on. Let’s go eat dinner before I decide to indulge my sweet tooth again.”

CHAPTER 18

Kinsley couldn't remember the last time she'd been so happy. She practically skipped along with Sawyer as they went inside his small rambler. She looked around as they walked in, noting the definite bachelor vibe. "Do your brothers live with you?"

"Ridge is married," Sawyer said as he dropped their food on the coffee table. "But Harlan and I still live together."

Kinsley looked around. "Where is he?"

"Working."

She frowned. "Harlan's working this late at night?"

Sawyer glanced over with a smug grin. "He may have decided to work after I told him I was bringing you over."

"So you drove your brother out of the house?" Kinsley slapped his shoulder. "Mean!"

He caught her hand and tugged her down with him on the couch. "I think the word you were really looking for was 'genius'."

She laughed and took the Styrofoam container he offered her. "Thank you." Kinsley folded her hands in her lap. "Mind if we say grace?"

Sawyer shook his head and set his stuff down. "That would be great."

After a blessing on the food, they opened up their dishes and Kinsley took a deep sniff. "Oh my goodness, that smells delicious."

"Told you," Sawyer said through a mouthful.

Kinsley wrinkled her nose. "Manners, Sawyer. Manners."

He swallowed and winked at her. "If I had a dollar for every time my mother or sister said that to one of us boys..."

Kinsley laughed and shook her head, then bit into the warm, filled pita. "Mmm..." she hummed. The gyro was fantastic, and before she knew it, it was gone. "Whew." Kinsley wiped her fingers on a napkin and sat back. "I shouldn't have eaten so much, but man, was that good."

"They're one of my favorite places," Sawyer admitted, leaning back as well. He turned his head to look at her. "I don't think they can tell us apart, but they know who we are when we come in."

Kinsley grinned. “Yeah...I can see how it would be difficult to tell you guys apart.” She pursed her lips. “Harlan’s hair is a little different, so that helps, not to mention he seems very serious. But Ridge and you...” She poked him in the stomach. “Maybe one of you needs to get a tattoo or something.”

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. “You want me to get some ink?”

“Weeellll...not really,” Kinsley admitted. “I’ve never really gone for the bad boy look.”

Sawyer leaned up and over toward her. “What look do you go for?” he asked, his voice softer than before.

“I made a list when I was a little girl,” Kinsley answered just as softly, watching his handsome face come closer to hers. She swallowed hard and prayed that her breath wasn’t horrible as he shifted closer.

“Yeah?” Sawyer leaned in and kissed her cheek. “What was on that list?”

Kinsley closed her eyes and took in a long breath through her nose. “The first requirement was that he had to be taller than me.”

Sawyer’s chest shook against her shoulder as he chuckled. “I think I can check that one off the list. What else?” He kissed the underside of her jaw.

“Uh...” It was getting difficult to concentrate, but Kinsley didn’t want him to stop, so she frantically wracked her brain for those things she had written down when she was a young teenage girl. “He had to love horses.”

“They’re growing on me,” Sawyer admitted as he kissed her ear.

“He had to be handsome,” Kinsley said before she thought better of it. When Sawyer began to laugh, she felt the heat in her cheeks turn to embarrassment as much as enjoyment. “Hey! I was young!” she defended.

Sawyer leaned back so they could see each other’s eyes. “That’s okay. I think we got that one covered too.”

Kinsley rolled her eyes and pushed on his chest. “Arrogant!”

He shook his head. “Confident.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Sometimes they’re the same thing,” she shot back, but she couldn’t help but smile.

He shrugged. “Say what you want.” When he brought their lips within millimeters of each other, he asked, “Anything else on this list I should be aware of?”

“I’m pretty sure it said he had to have blue eyes and blond, curly hair,” Kinsley said almost inaudibly. Her paper said no such thing. In fact, she

was pretty sure her descriptions were closer to describing Brad Pitt than someone like Sawyer Lockwood, but in that moment, Kinsley wasn't too worried about what her teenage self thought.

Sawyer's eyebrows shot up high. "That's oddly specific."

She grinned. "What can I say? I know what I like."

Sawyer shook his head and smiled. "I'm going to kiss you now," he said. "But before I do, you should know that I'm completely head over heels for you, Kinsley Storm. You'd think with as many of the people at my office who have found their significant other lately that I would have been prepared for this, but I wasn't. I thought you would just be another rich girl, another assignment. But from the time you put down your foot and refused to let me have my way, I knew there was more to you than I realized."

Kinsley blinked hard, but the tears that were forming at his sweet words wouldn't stop. One by one, they began to trickle down her cheeks, and she took in a ragged breath.

"I'm so sorry that I was so stubborn for so long." He kissed one of her eyes, and then the other. "But I'm here now and even after this case is over, I have no intention of letting you go."

"That's good," she breathed. "Because there's nowhere I'd rather be than at your side."

Sawyer chuckled. "I won't tell Addy you said that."

She smiled and shrugged. "I'm pretty sure he already knows."

"Then this one's for him," Sawyer said, closing the distance.

SAWYER IGNORED THE buzzing in his back pocket, instead choosing to sit back and bring Kinsley over to his lap. Just as he got her settled, his phone went off again and he reluctantly stopped their interaction. "Dang phone," he mumbled.

Reaching back, he snatched it out of his back pocket and went to throw it on the coffee table, but it went off again. Curious as to who would call so many times, he glanced at the screen. He frowned at Ridge's name. "Sorry," he mumbled to Kinsley. "Let me take this really quick."

Kinsley pouted, but leaned against his shoulder to wait for him.

"Hello?" Sawyer asked quickly, hoping it was just a social call.

“Dude, where are you?” Ridge’s voice was a tight whisper and Sawyer’s guard immediately went up.

“At the house.”

“Is Kinsley with you?”

“Yes.”

“You need to get down to the barn,” Ridge said even more quietly. “Something funny is going on here.”

Sawyer sat up and Kinsley straightened, her brow furrowed as she tried to figure out what was going on. “What do you mean?”

“Roman and I came to put in the system tonight,” Ridge said quickly, “But we almost got caught. We’re hiding at the moment, but someone is at Amadeus’ stall, and the horse isn’t happy he’s there.”

Sawyer pushed Kinsley off his lap and jumped up, grabbing his keys and heading for the door. “What does he look like?” he barked, going immediately into protective mode. He jumped into the SUV and went to start the engine when the passenger door opened and Kinsley climbed in. “You need to stay here,” Sawyer ground out as he turned the key too hard.

“I’m going, too,” she said, sticking her chin in the air. “This is my horse we’re talking about.”

Sawyer forced himself to soften his words. “Kins, I can’t risk you getting hurt. Please stay back.”

Tears began to fill her eyes. “No, Sawyer. I have to go. I have to.”

Sawyer closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, unsure how to make her understand, when Ridge spoke up.

“Dude, you don’t have time to argue. I don’t know enough about horses to know what this guy’s up to, but it can’t be good. Just get here. We’ll help you keep her safe.”

Without another word, Sawyer slammed the vehicle into drive and tore out of the driveway. “Tell me what he looks like,” Sawyer demanded after he’d gotten onto the road.

“Young, lanky...he’s wearing a ballcap so I can’t really see his hair,” Ridge said. “There’s not much to distinguish him.”

Sawyer frowned. That description definitely meant it could be Tyrone, but it also fit a dozen other workers at the barn.

“What’s Amadeus doing?” Kinsley asked loudly enough for Ridge to hear.

Sawyer pulled the phone away from his ear and turned on the speaker button, then handed it to Kinsley.

"He's snorting and stomping. Keeps throwing his head, too," Sawyer added. "I don't know horse language or anything, but he doesn't seem happy."

Kinsley nodded. "Is the person actually in the stall?"

Love for the woman at his right soared through Sawyer. Here they were talking about someone possibly trying to hurt her favorite possession, again, and Kinsley was as cool as a cucumber, asking questions to better help them understand the situation.

"He's trying to get in," Ridge whispered, "but the horse isn't making it easy."

"Good, that's good," Kinsley muttered. "Can you tell why the guy wants in?"

"Not exactly," Ridge said. "But he's carrying a bucket with a bunch of supplies in it."

Kinsley frowned. "What kind of supplies?"

"It looks like a hammer handle, and the bucket keeps making metal noises."

"Horseshoeing supplies?" Kinsley muttered more quietly, as if thinking out loud. "What would he be doing with that?"

"Can you cripple a horse with the wrong horseshoe?" Sawyer asked.

Kinsley gasped, and her knuckles turned white as she gripped the phone. "That's it. He must be trying to mess with Addy's shoes." Her breathing grew shallow and rapid, and Sawyer began to fear she would hyperventilate.

"Kinsley!" Sawyer spoke loudly in order to gain her attention through the fear. "What happens if the guy messes with Addy's shoes?"

"He can go lame, or if there's a funny nail, he can bleed and be hurt," she said through her sniffles. "If he's hurt enough, it could cause problems for regionals next week."

Sawyer nodded his understanding and took back the phone. "Don't you let that guy anywhere near Amadeus, Ridge. Do what you have to, to take him down."

"I've got no proof he's trying to hurt anyone," Ridge whispered back. There was a pause before he spoke again. "How far can I let him go before I

interfere, Sawyer? Because we both know this whole thing will go far better if we actually have evidence."

Kinsley put a fist to her mouth and looked like she was ready to break down in sobs. As much as Sawyer wanted to give Ridge the go-ahead to let the perpetrator actually do something illegal, he couldn't bring himself to do it. The thought of Kinsley's anguish if something happened to Amadeus was too great.

"We can't risk it," Sawyer said hoarsely. "You gotta stop him now. Hopefully we can get some kind of confession from the guy when we get there."

"No." Kinsley's voice was raspy and small.

Sawyer looked over. "What?"

"Leave him be for now," she said thickly. After clearing her throat, Kinsley spoke again. "Ridge, keep an eye on him. If he gets in the stall, make sure you're recording it. If, at any time, the man touches Amadeus and he seems to be in pain, then please intervene. Otherwise, wait and watch. We'll be there in about ten more minutes."

"Roger, roger," Ridge said. "I'm gonna hang up now so I can concentrate, but keep your phone handy."

Sawyer set the device down and re-gripped the steering wheel. "Kinsley Storm, if I haven't said it before..." He swallowed hard. "You are absolutely amazing."

"Actually," she whispered, "I'm trusting in the fact that you're amazing and will put this guy where he belongs."

Sawyer nodded firmly, creating an unspoken promise that he wouldn't let her down.

CHAPTER 19

Kinsley felt as if she might throw up. The closer they got to the barn, the more her stomach rebelled. Someone was in that barn, trying to hurt her horse. Logically she knew that Ridge and Roman were there and would keep anything major from happening, but she couldn't shake the ominous feeling of impending doom.

Sawyer had slowed way down as they pulled into the ranch, trying to make as little noise as possible so as to not spook whoever was in the barn. With his headlights off, he pulled up as close as he dared.

Shutting off the engine, he moved to get out. "I'd really like it if you stayed here," he said softly.

Kinsley shook her head. "Please don't ask that of me," Kinsley said, opening her own door and stepping out.

Sawyer sighed, but didn't argue with her, for which Kinsley was grateful. She wasn't sure she was in the right frame of mind to fight with him right now.

Sawyer looked down at his phone, then showed the text to her.

Ridge: **Guy made it in the stall. We're closing in for a better look.**

Kinsley clenched her jaw shut and nodded once.

Sawyer tilted his head toward the barn and silently, they headed toward the entrance. Once there, Sawyer paused, his eyes seeming to plead with her, but Kinsley shook her head. She was not about to stay away. *This is my horse and my life. There's no way I can just sit back and twiddle my thumbs.*

With a resigned nod, Sawyer pulled on the door handle.

Kinsley let out a quiet breath when they discovered it unlocked. The large barn door would have made too much noise, but the side office door wasn't always open. Luck was on their side tonight. *Let's hope it stays that way,* she thought, sending a quick prayer heavenward.

Crouching low, Sawyer led the way into the darkened office. Once they were at the door to the main part of the barn, he stayed down and shot off a text. Kinsley assumed he was letting Ridge know where they were. His

screen lit up with an answer, but this time he didn't show Kinsley. Sawyer pocketed his phone and reached for the doorknob.

Ever so slowly, he turned it, easing the door open, then glanced carefully into the hallway.

Kinsley desperately wanted him to move so she could see what was going on, but at the same time, she was terrified of what they might find. *Is Addy okay? Has the man done anything to him?* She could hear Amadeus whinnying, and it only served to send her heart into spasms.

Sawyer seemed unmoved by the noises and without looking back or whispering a word, he slipped out the door. Kinsley scrambled after him, determined not to be left behind.

Out in the long walkway, she could see Sawyer's back, and in the distance, Ridge was pressed up against a stall. Nervous noises were echoing through the space as the other horses reacted to Amadeus' angry cries.

Please be okay. Please be okay. Kinsley searched for the other bodyguard Sawyer had said was coming, but she couldn't see anyone. *Hopefully he's recording all this,* she thought.

Unsure of what to do, Kinsley forced herself to stay against the wall as they slowly made their way down to Addy's stall. Her stomach continued to churn, and she was sure she would lose her dinner on the concrete if they didn't end this all soon.

With each breath, she chanted a prayer for Amadeus' safety, but at the same time, hoped that whoever was recording all this found evidence of foul play so the saboteur could be put behind bars.

Sweat began to trickle down her temple and spine, and she nearly jumped to her feet when Addy snorted hard and stomped. Sawyer reached back, grasping her forearm with a reassuring squeeze, but it did nothing for Kinsley's nerves. She felt her muscles twitching with a repressed need to move, and she knew she was about to blow.

When Amadeus kicked his stall door and whinnied loud enough to wake the dead, she knew she could stand it no longer.

"STOP!" Kinsley screamed, jumping to her feet and rushing down the rest of the walkway. "STOP IT!" She ignored Sawyer's shout and flung open Addy's stall door. "THAT'S MY HORSE!" She sputtered to a halt. "Ty-Tyrone?"

Kinsley's chest heaved as she sucked in air and took in the scene. She shook her head just as Sawyer came up behind her. "How could you?" she

said on a sob.

Tyrone held out his hands. “This isn’t what it looks like,” Tyrone sputtered. His eyes darted behind her to Sawyer, and his wide-eyed gaze hardened. “You,” he spat. “What are you doing here?”

Sawyer’s hands clasped Kinsley’s upper arms and gently pushed her aside. “Taking you in,” Sawyer said calmly, stepping in between Kinsley and Tyrone.

Amadeus shied sideways, and Kinsley jumped in front of Sawyer to be with her horse. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she spoke soothingly in his ear. “I’m here, boy. I won’t let anything happen to you.” She glanced down at the tack and glared at Tyrone. “What were you going to do?” she asked, her tone trembled, but Kinsley was too upset to care. She was just grateful Tyrone hadn’t actually managed to hurt her horse before she intervened.

Tyrone ignored her question, instead continuing to glare at Sawyer. “You shouldn’t have interfered,” he growled in a voice that Kinsley had never heard before.

Her heart broke as she thought of the man she thought she knew. She had been completely fooled by Tyrone’s quiet, shy demeanor.

“Someone had to stop you,” Sawyer said calmly as he stepped further into the stall.

Tyrone tensed and Sawyer stopped moving. Even Kinsley could tell that Tyrone was feeling threatened and ready to bolt.

Sawyer held out one hand in supplication. “Just come with me, Tyrone, and make it easier on everyone.”

“You don’t understand,” the young man snarled. “You don’t understand at all.”

Kinsley bit her tongue. She was completely shocked as well as livid, and she knew if she spoke, she would only say things she shouldn’t. The weight of betrayal felt as if it would crush her. *I’ve been defending him! All this time I’ve been defending him, and Sawyer was right. How could I have been so blind?*

SAWYER COULD SEE THAT Kinsley was close to losing it, but the man in front of him was his biggest worry. He knew Kinsley had to be feeling

horrible right about now. She'd defended Tyrone for so long, and here he was, trying to hurt the thing that was most precious to her.

"I understand that you want to be noticed," Sawyer said with forced calm. He leaned his weight forward a little more. Tyrone was tense and ready to bolt, and normally Sawyer would have just gotten the jump on him, but with a horse only a couple feet away and Tyrone's hands full of metal tools, it was too easy for someone to get hurt.

Tyrone's lip curled. "Noticed? You think I want to be noticed?"

Sawyer blinked, taken off guard for a moment. Not sure what else to do, he kept speaking, praying that Ridge and Roman would make themselves known soon. "I know how easy it is to get caught up in someone who doesn't give you the attention you want...the attention you deserve. You're far from the first man to fall for a pretty face or a sweet smile."

Tyrone began to chuckle, then it turned into a wild, maniacal laugh. "You don't know ANYTHING!" he screamed, suddenly serious. His knuckles turned white as he held onto a hammer and crowbar. "You think I did this because of Kinsley?"

Sawyer paused. "You aren't in love with Kinsley?"

Tyrone snorted. "You're even dumber than I thought." He laughed. "All brawn and no brains." Tsking his tongue, Tyrone's eyes darted to Kinsley. "You sure know how to pick 'em, Kins."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she shot back, holding tighter to Amadeus' neck.

"No...YOU don't know what you're talking about," Tyrone shouted. "All day, every day I sit in this barn and work. Work until my hands bleed and my knees ache." He pounded his chest. "I'm twenty-two years old and my body feels like it's eighty. I have no life outside these horses." He stepped back and Sawyer tried to follow, but Tyrone held up the crowbar. "Why, you might ask?" Tyrone raised an eyebrow. "Because my *mother* had an affair."

Sawyer's body froze. His senses were twitching. Everything he'd thought about Tyrone was wrong. Sawyer thought the young man was in love with Kinsley and trying to get her attention, trying to play hero, but as the truth came spilling out, Sawyer realized his intuition had been completely off base.

"I don't understand," Kinsley responded quietly.

“Of course, you don’t,” Tyrone said calmly, too calmly. “You’ve never had to wonder about your family. You knew your parents.”

“What does your mother—”

“My mother had an affair with Coach Ritton,” Tyrone spat. “I was the inevitable result.”

“So all this time you’ve been trying to get your father’s attention?” Sawyer pressed, ignoring Kinsley’s gasp of shock.

Tyrone snickered. “I wouldn’t want that man’s attention if he was the last person on Earth.” Tyrone leaned in slightly, a wild smile on his lips. “No...I want to ruin him.”

The pieces all began to click into place. “You thought by taking down his star student, you would ruin Ritton’s reputation.” Sawyer laid it all out. “That’s why you kept messing with Kinsley’s things during the shows. You wanted Kinsley to fail so that your father would look bad.”

Tyrone shrugged and readjusted the tools in his hands. “It would serve him right. The media praises him like he’s some kind of horse god when in reality, he’s a homewrecker.”

“I defended you,” Kinsley said hoarsely. “I stood up for you how many times, and this is what you do? You put my life, my reputation, and my horse in danger?”

A brief moment of shame flashed over Tyrone, but it didn’t last long. “I’m sorry, Kins. You were the only person who was kind to me, but I couldn’t let that stand in the way of taking down Ritton. He doesn’t deserve everything he has.”

Sawyer tried to step forward one more time, but Tyrone held the crowbar back up again.

“Nuh-uh, muscles. Hold it right there.” Tyrone smirked. “I knew you would be trouble the day that Kinsley brought you in. She was so trusting, it made it easy to mess with her stuff, but then you showed up.” Tyrone sidestepped and waved the crowbar at Sawyer and Kinsley, warning them to back away.

Sawer put his hands up and made sure he moved so he was in between Kinsley and Tyrone. Kinsley pushed Amadeus to the side, turning the horse slightly in the stall.

“You didn’t like me from the beginning,” Tyrone continued while shrugging. “While the feeling was mutual, I knew it would be more difficult to do what I needed to do.” He continued to threaten them with the weapon

and walk sideways so he was approaching the stall opening. “However, I’m not about to let some steroid junkie take me down.”

Sawyer shook his head. “You won’t make it out of here,” he said. “Now that we know who it is, cops will be hunting you down. You’ll never live normally again.”

Tyrone shrugged. “I’m sure I can get out of the country before it’s a big deal.”

Sawyer did his best not to react to Ridge coming up behind Tyrone. He didn’t want to tip Tyrone off, but he hoped his brother could see the tools in the perp’s hands. “If Kinsley was so kind to you, why did you risk her life by poisoning her?”

Tyrone snorted. “Her life was never in danger.” His lips curled as he stepped backward. “Who do you think takes care of the rats in the barn?” Tyrone shook his head. “All it took was a simple calculation to know how much would cause a reaction, but not hurt her.”

“You’re crazy,” Kinsley whispered.

Sawyer tensed, worried the words would enrage the unstable young man, but Tyrone just shrugged. “I might be crazy, but at least I’m going to be free.” His eyes flashed. “But in a moment, you won’t be.” Tyrone tucked the hammer into a belt loop and reached in his pocket, still holding the crowbar out. Pulling a lighter out of his pocket, he flicked it to life.

Kinsley let out a sob, and Sawyer reached one arm back to hold her in place. He didn’t speak as he waited for Tyrone to make his move. Standing in a pile of sawdust was the last place Sawyer wanted to be with fire close by, but he couldn’t do anything until Tyrone took one last step back.

As Tyrone waved the flame around and laughed, then he finally backed into the walkway. *Got him*. “NOW!” Sawyer shouted.

With a yell, Ridge jumped Tyrone from behind as Sawyer aimed for the crowbar.

Tyrone howled in pain as he was wrestled to the ground and the tool and lighter were wrenched from his grip.

“Sawyer, duck!” Kinsley screamed.

Without the slightest bit of hesitation, Sawyer leapt to the side and rolled. He quickly looked back, freezing when he saw Amadeus’ hooves come down on Tyrone’s legs.

Tyrone screamed and Ridge shouted.

“RIDGE!” Sawyer scrambled back, desperate to make sure his brother hadn’t been hit in the fray.

CHAPTER 20

"Easy, boy," Kinsley cooed, tugging Amadeus back inside his stall. Her legs were trembling so fiercely, she was sure she would collapse at any moment, but she needed to get the angry horse away from the men. Addy had already kicked out and landed on Tyrone, and despite the fact that Kinsley felt betrayed and sick about Tyrone's story, she didn't want to kill him.

"Come on, Addy," Kinsley continued, working hard to keep her voice soft as she turned him around to keep him from hurting anyone else. Her voice was just as wobbly as her legs, and her fingers felt numb as she stroked the animal's nose. "It'll be okay. Let's just take it easy."

"Ridge!" Sawyer's voice broke and Kinsley turned to see if Ridge was all right.

"I'm fine!" Ridge called out, untangling himself from an unconscious Tyrone. "I'm fine. Bruised liked the dickens, but fine."

Sawyer stood next to the men, pressing his hands onto his knees as he took several deep breaths. "Don't you ever scare me like that again," he finally rasped to his brother.

Ridge grinned. "Ah, Sawyer...I didn't know you cared so much, bro!" Ridge finally got to his feet and slapped Sawyer on the back.

Sawyer hauled off and slugged Ridge in the shoulder hard.

"Geez," Ridge muttered, rubbing the spot. "I already told you I'm bruised. No need to add to the collection." He smirked. "Although if it makes you hyperventilate again, it might be worth it."

Sawyer rolled his eyes and shook his head, grumbling quietly under his breath. He turned and his eyes locked onto Kinsley. "You got this guy, right?" Sawyer asked Ridge, gesturing toward Tyrone without removing his eyes from Kinsley.

Her breath caught in her throat and now Kinsley worried she'd collapse for an entirely different reason. Sawyer's gaze was so intense, she felt trapped. She didn't want to look away. Addy snorted, and the air blew Kinsley's hair into her face, but it still didn't faze her.

"Yeah, I got him," Ridge grumbled, looking down at Tyrone's prone body. He kicked at Tyrone's arm. "What exactly are you planning to do?" he asked Sawyer.

"Celebrate freedom," Sawyer said immediately. Without further warning, he stormed into the paddock with Kinsley and wrapped his arms around her, bringing their mouths together. "You are never allowed to go on an assignment with me again," Sawyer whispered hoarsely in between their kisses.

"Okay," Kinsley agreed. Her arms were wrapped around his neck, her fingers enjoying the soft feel of his hair.

"You're gonna stick to your horse shows," he continued.

"Okay." Kinsley sighed as Sawyer kissed down her neck.

"And you're not allowed to ever be in danger."

"Okay." Kinsley continued to agree with everything he said. She wasn't even sure what some of his demands were, but right now, she'd have agreed to anything if it meant having his arms around her like this forever.

"And if you ever get the idea to have another fake boyfriend, I'll take him down," Sawyer growled right before taking her mouth in a fierce kiss. "I love you," he rasped. "I love you more than you can know, and I'm not willing to give you up."

Kinsley wasn't able to answer him for some time, but eventually the adrenaline-induced frenzy slowed and their kisses became far more sweet and gentle. "I love you, too," she whispered. "And I have no problem complying with your demands," Kinsley said softly, pulling back to look Sawyer in the eye. "I haven't had a problem with it for a long time now."

Sawyer sighed and brought their foreheads together. "Think you can manage to take your actual boyfriend around instead of a bodyguard fake boyfriend?"

"I think that sounds like the best idea you've ever had," Kinsley answered with a grin.

"No, the best idea I ever had was for you to wait in the truck," Sawyer complained. "Then I wouldn't have lost ten years of my life in worrying about you."

"Actually," Ridge interrupted their moment, "the best idea you ever had was back during our senior year in high school when you decided to—"

"Are the police on their way yet?" Sawyer interrupted, his face turning pink.

Oooh…I'll have to have Ridge finish telling me this story another time, Kinsley thought, fighting a grin at Sawyer's discomfort.

"Should be here any second," a deep voice said from down the breezeway.

They all turned to look at the extra large man coming their way.

"Roman, dude!" Ridge called out with a wide smile. "I nearly forgot you were with us!" He chuckled. "Too bad you missed all the action."

A small grin tugged at the large man's mouth. "Don't worry. I got it." He held up a small camera. "Every bit of it."

Sawyer's shoulders sagged. "You didn't happen to catch audio, too, did you?"

Roman nodded. "It's not going to be perfect, but it should be enough." He glanced up. "I was tucked back, but managed to get high enough for a decent view."

Kinsley blew out a breath and collapsed against Sawyer's shoulder. "Thank heavens." Tears pricked her eyes as the emotions of the last thirty minutes came slamming back in with full force. "I can't believe it was him," she whispered thickly. "I can't believe Tyrone would do all those things." She swallowed hard. "And I can't believe Coach was at the root of it all."

Sawyer wrapped her tight in his arms. "He's not well, Kins. It's obvious either the revenge or maybe something else has messed with his mind." He rested his cheek against her head. "I'm just sorry you were caught in the middle of it all."

Kinsley shook her head and wiped her tears. "I'm grateful he was caught. If he'd picked another victim, they might not have had the ability to hire someone like you."

"We do tend to get our bad guy," Ridge said with a smirk. Leaning in slightly, he whispered, "And we look good doing it, too, except for ol' Sawyer here." Ridge laughed as he danced away from Sawyer's fist.

"Considering you look just like me, you just insulted yourself," Sawyer shot back.

Ridge shrugged. "I've already got my lady, so..."

Kinsley shook her head and leaned into Sawyer's shoulder again. She laughed lightly when Amadeus pushed against her other side. Letting go of Sawyer, she stepped back and wrapped her arms back around her horse. "Good job, boy. You knew he was up to no good, didn't you?"

Without warning the barn door burst open and quickly filled with chaos as police and paramedics entered the space.

AS THE MESS WOUND DOWN, Sawyer looked to see how Kinsley was holding up. Her shoulder was pressed against Amadeus' side, and her head leaning on his back. Her eyes were half-closed, and it looked like she would collapse at any moment. "Excuse me," Sawyer said to the officer standing in front of him. Stepping around the crew of emergency workers, he made his way into the stall. "Hey, beautiful," he said softly. "You look worn out."

Kinsley smiled wearily. "How come half the things you say to me are about how I look terrible?"

Sawyer shook his head. "Don't be putting words in my mouth. I said no such thing."

"Well, it means that in girl speak."

"I don't know girl speak, so you'll have to interpret it in guy speak," Sawyer shot back. He leaned in and nuzzled her cheek. Now that the danger was over, he was done with holding back.

"Maybe I don't know guy speak." She sighed.

"Stick with me, baby, and I'll teach you everything you need to know," Sawyer whispered in her ear with a grin.

Kinsley laughed and pushed at his chest halfheartedly. When he didn't move, she just left her hands there and became solemn. "Is it really over? Is Tyrone going to jail?"

Sawyer sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. "Yeah. But we still need to talk to Ritton. That's not gonna be pleasant."

She patted his chest. "Good luck with that."

Sawyer raised his eyebrows. "Oh, so you're leaving the hard work up to me? I see how this relationship is going to go."

Kinsley smiled. "You're getting paid for this. I'm just an innocent bystander."

Sawyer put his hands on Amadeus, caging her in. "Maybe I don't care about being paid."

Her dark eyes darted back and forth between his, the yearning in them speaking far louder than words ever could. "What do you care about?" she whispered.

"You." Sawyer leaned forward to meet her, but just as they were about to connect, a loud, bellowing voice echoed through the barn.

"What's going on here?" Ritton's growl was easily distinguishable above every other voice.

Sawyer sighed and straightened back up. "Wish me luck," he said as he moved to the stall door.

Kinsley slipped her fingers into his. "You don't need it. You're amazing." She smiled and followed him into the walkway, heading toward the shouting coach.

"Lockwood!" Ritton shouted at Ridge. "What happened?"

Ridge looked at the coach, and then at Sawyer. "Who's he?" Ridge asked.

Ritton looked to see who Ridge was speaking to and did a double take. "What the—" His mouth pinched into a small, white line. "Are you telling me there are two of you now? How the heck did that happen?"

"Actually, there are three of us." All heads turned to Harlan, who had just entered the barn. He raised a cool eyebrow at Ritton. "Coach Ritton, I presume?"

Ritton's head nearly spun off his shoulders as he looked from one brother to the other. Finally, he flung his arms in the air. "Would somebody tell me what the he—"

"Uh-uh!" Ridge shouted, covering the curse. He grinned when Ritton quieted down. "There are ladies present."

The coach's face was turning an alarming shade of red, forcing Sawyer to take hold of the situation. "Coach." Ritton turned to Sawyer. "We have a lot to talk about."

"You Sawyer?" Ritton snapped. His eyes went to Sawyer and Kinsley's entwined fingers.

Sawyer nodded. "This is my brother, Ridge." Sawyer tipped his head. "And the one by the door is Harlan."

Ritton rubbed his hands down his face. "Never seen anything like it," he grumbled.

Sawyer squeezed Kinsley's hand as she snickered quietly. "Come on, Coach. Let's go somewhere more private."

Sawyer led the way to the office, Harlan and Ridge following behind. Once they were inside the quiet room, Sawyer took the lead. "Tyrone was behind the attacks," he said softly.

Coach jerked back. “That weasel? Are you sure?”

Sawyer sighed and he felt a heavy weight push down on his shoulders. When Kinsley rubbed his back, he sent her a grateful smile. *This is going to be harder than I thought*. “We caught him in the act of messing with Amadeus’ shoe.”

Ritton cursed again and put his hands on his hips. “But why? Anyone who knew him knew that Tyrone liked Kinsley. Why hurt her?”

“He was trying to get to you,” Sawyer said quickly.

Ritton frowned deeply. “Me? Why would he want to get to me?”

Sawyer ignored Rigde’s mutterings about idiots and pushed on. The next words felt like acid on his tongue, but he knew things would never be settled until everything was out. “Because he’s your son.”

The room went deathly still, and for a moment, Sawyer was afraid that Ritton would pass out. The coach’s face had gone deathly pale, and he swayed a little on his feet. Before Sawyer could react, Kinsley jumped in and helped the older man sit down.

“My son?” Ritton croaked. “How can that be?” He shook his head. “Wait...don’t answer that.”

Sawyer held out his hand, inviting Kinsley back by his side. He wasn’t ready to have her so far away, even for a few minutes.

Ritton groaned and leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “It all makes sense now, how she wanted me to hire him. How she kept insisting he would be useful around the barn.” He shook his head and looked up at his audience. For the first time since Sawyer knew him, Ritton looked broken and his eyes were filled with tears. “I didn’t know,” he rasped. “I didn’t know.”

“But Tyrone did,” Sawyer said softly. “And he wanted to ruin your life the way he felt you ruined his.”

In a shocking move, Ritton’s breathing quickened and soon he was sobbing into his hands.

“Come on,” Kinsley said, nodding toward the door. “Let’s give him a minute.”

All three brothers and Kinsley filed back into the hallway.

“Why don’t we plan on meeting tomorrow at one,” Harlan said as they stopped. “You two can catch me up on everything, and we’ll tie up any loose ends at that point.”

Sawyer nodded and wrapped an arm around Kinsley's shoulders. He suddenly felt heavy. His adrenaline was draining, and he wanted nothing more than to go home and lie down for a week. Having to tell Ritton about his son was the hardest part of all, and Sawyer felt as emotionally drained as he was physically.

"Can you take me home?" Kinsley asked, drawing his attention back to the present. "I don't have a car."

Sawyer kissed her temple. "You sure you don't want to just come home with me?"

Kinsley elbowed him, but her smile let him know she was enjoying his flirting. "You haven't earned that right."

"Things to look forward to, I guess," he muttered as they walked out of the barn.

EPILOGUE

Kinsley's smile was a mile wide as she sat on Amadeus' back and waved to the crowd. *We did it. We actually did it.* Her victory at nationals felt sweeter than ever after overcoming all the trials during the season.

Her eyes caught on a particular blond head in the audience and she felt her smile turn impossibly wider. Sawyer put his fingers in his mouth and whistled loud enough to wake the dead, causing some of the people closest to him to wince and cover their ears. Kinsley shook her head, her love for her ex-bodyguard soaring through her.

Once her time in the limelight was over, she walked Addy to the edge of the arena, then slid off. She immediately wrapped her arms around him. "You are amazing," she cooed in his ear. "Thank you so much for your hard work."

Amadeus snorted and turned to butt his head against her.

Kinsley laughed and grabbed his halter, leading him down the walkway. Her blouse felt drenched, and she wanted nothing more than to take off the stiff uniform she was forced to wear and relax in order to celebrate her win.

Cameras and journalists slowed her progress, but Kinsley tried very hard to be patient with them and answer all their questions while she slowly worked her way back to the barn area.

Once her interviews were over, she breathed a sigh of relief and picked up her pace. When she turned the corner to head toward the stalls, she stopped. Sawyer was standing at her spot, with the gate open, waiting for her to arrive.

He smiled wide and beckoned her on, giving Kinsley the energy she needed to finish walking down the path.

"Have I told you lately how awesome you are?" he asked as she stepped up for a quick kiss.

"Mmm...Not lately," Kinsley said with a smirk. She walked into the stall and brought Amadeus inside.

Once everyone was in, Sawyer came around as well and closed all three of them inside. “Well, you are,” he said softly.

“It feels so good,” Kinsley said through her smile. “We’ve worked so hard for this.”

Sawyer nodded.

Kinsley took off her helmet and jacket, then began to unload the gear off Addy’s back. “Didn’t we, boy?” she asked as she set the saddle down. “You’re the best horse in the whole world.”

Sawyer snorted. “We’re actually together now and I’m still jealous of a horse.”

Kinsley laughed lightly, then turned to the blond hunk and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “You’re the best boyfriend in the whole world.”

Sawyer smirked and gave her a hard, but short kiss. “There’s only one thing I’d like better than that,” Sawyer whispered against her cheek.

Kinsley frowned. “What? You don’t want to be the best boyfriend?”

Sawyer pulled back and slowly shook his head. “Not when I’d rather be the best husband in the world.”

Kinsley gasped and her knees buckled, causing Sawyer to wrap his arms tighter around her. “Are you serious?” she breathed.

“More serious than I’ve ever been,” Sawyer said. Slowly, he released her, making sure she was steady before he reached in his pocket and dropped to one knee. “Kinsley Storm, you are without a doubt the most intriguing, maddening, amazing woman I have ever met.”

He raised an eyebrow when she attempted to speak, so Kinsley snapped her mouth shut. Warmth was spreading through her body, along with excitement, and she was having a hard time standing still. She bounced on her toes a little as he continued.

“Although it might have taken me a long time to be willing to acknowledge my feelings, I can guarantee you that no one in this world will ever love you the way I do. I’ll love you, hold you, protect you, and take care of you like you’re the most precious jewel on earth.” He swallowed hard, and tears began to form in Kinsley’s eyes. “Because that’s exactly what you are. And if you’ll agree to take me on as your husband, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you never regret it.”

Kinsley wanted to throw her arms around him and kiss Sawyer until he couldn’t see straight, but a tiny imp of mischief ran through her mind, and

after everything he'd put her through, she decided to tease him a bit. She put her hands on her hips and looked over at Addy. "Whatta ya think, Addy? Do we want this lug around forever?"

Sawyer rolled his eyes as if he knew exactly what she was doing, but Kinsley waited out Amadeus' answer.

When the horse snorted and began to nibble at Sawyer's head, she couldn't help but laugh. "I guess that means yes." She giggled, holding out her hand for the ring.

Sawyer scowled and pushed the horse away before standing and slipping the solitaire onto Kinsley's finger. "We need to curb him of that, or I'm going to be bald before my time."

Kinsley admired the shiny diamond, then wrapped her arms around his neck and ran one hand through his hair. "And that would be a shame because I adore your curls." She grinned. "Especially this one." She tugged on the extra tight one behind his ear.

"Enough to keep playing with it forever?" he asked, leaning in close.

"Enough to want my children to have it," she whispered back right before their lips met.

In true Sawyer fashion, the kiss quickly went from sweet to fierce, and Kinsley allowed herself to melt into the usual puddle. *I've been after this championship for years,* she mused internally. W*ho'd have thought that a brooding bodyguard would turn out to be my real win?*

Swoon! Can you imagine having
someone like Sawyer on your side?
There's just something about that
alpha male protectiveness...
Am I right?
Not ready for the romance to end?
Don't worry! Archer's story is up next!
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“Her Loyal Bodyguard”

CHAPTER 1

"I'm a grown woman, dad," Edwina, or Edi as she preferred to be called, said in exasperation. She stopped stuffing her clothes into her suitcase and put her hands on her hips. "I realize you have this whole..." she waved her arms through the air, "idea of the perfect family facade for your public persona, but you're going to have to do it without me."

She turned back to her work and once again began packing. The plane she wanted to leave on was heading out to Argentina tomorrow and Edi wasn't even close to being ready. She'd only been home from teaching English in China for about ten days, but it was proving to be ten days too long.

"You just got home," Robert, her father, complained. "Can't you spend a few more days with us before you go throwing yourself into danger again?"

Edi scoffed. "Why? So you can make sure we get our picture taken for the newspaper? So you can brag about my work and use it to further your vote count?" She snorted and shook her head. "I don't think so."

A warm hand landed on her shoulder and Edi jumped a little, then turned to face her father. She hadn't gotten along with him for many years, but she had to admit some of that was her fault. Her father was a politician through and through and though his campaigns might be at more local levels, his mind never left the race.

During her teenage years, Edi's life had fallen apart when her mother had left them and it wasn't until all the problems her parents had been having came to light that Edi realized her whole life was a lie. Her father was just as good at hiding his life from his family as he was at hiding it from the public and Edi wanted nothing to do with it.

Edi couldn't blame her mother for leaving, but when Cecilia Ross died while drunk at the wheel, Edi found she couldn't quite forgive her either.

As soon as she was old enough, Edi had started traveling and had never looked back. Driven by a need to help those who had nothing, Edi spent her time living in tents, hostels and other less than ideal situations in order to

accomplish her work. There was something inside of her that was empty and yearning. Service was the only way she could think of to fill that void.

She knew her kind of lifestyle could be dangerous for a single, young woman, but she'd learned how to be careful and take care of herself. And she wasn't about to let her father's next campaign stop her from leaving on tomorrow's plane.

"No photos," Robert said, putting his hands in the air. "I just..." his shoulders dropped. "I just want to spend time with you," he said softly. "You left the house for the first time almost ten years ago and have rarely been back since." He pushed a hand through his still thick, wavy hair. "Your mother—"

"She's not my mother," Edi interrupted.

Robert sighed and nodded. "Your stepmother would like a chance to get to know you. And your brothers barely recognize you."

"They're four, that's to be expected," Edi shot back. Even as she put on a tough face, her heart pinched. Edi's mom had jumped into a quick marriage with her yoga instructor before she'd died. Robert, however, had taken a little longer, but true to the stereotype, had married one of his young political aides and a year later had become a father again to twin boys.

By the time Matthew and Judah had arrived, Edi had already been out of the house, but she'd seen pictures of the two rascals. They were as darling as they came and the yearning inside of her grew overwhelming as she saw the family she so desperately craved. But then reality would slap her in the face and Edi would realize it wasn't true.

The happy, wonderful family that Bob Ross and his young wife, Stephanie, portrayed was nothing more than a public facade. If life had taught Edi anything, it had taught her that. Behind every smile there were secrets and sometimes those secrets were enough to break a person.

Bob sighed and slumped into a chair in her bedroom. "Look, honey, I know we hurt you when everything...fell apart all those years ago," he began, but Edi put up her hand.

"I don't need to hear it," Edi said firmly. "I'm grown up enough to realize how life works. What's done is done." She finished shoving her favorite sweatshirt into her bag and zipped it shut. "I'm grateful that you help me financially with these trips, dad," Edi said softly, her chest aching from the hole that had been left there nearly a decade ago. "But I don't want to get all chummy with your new family. And I have absolutely no desire to

find out what skeletons you're hiding in your closet now." She shook her head. "You do what you want with your life and I'll do what I want with mine." She forced a smile. "This way we're both happy."

"But you're not," Robert said softly.

Edi stiffened, her smile frozen in place. "What?"

"You're not happy," her father pointed out. "You're running away from your problems and it's draining you."

Edi scoffed. "You have no idea how I feel, dad."

Bob closed his eyes for a moment, before looking back at his daughter. "Will you at least take what's his name," her dad tapped his lips. "Caden? Will you at least take Caden with you so I'm not so worried about your safety?"

Edi held back her eye roll. "Caden and I went our separate ways nearly six months ago, dad."

"Edwina—"

"Edi," she nearly growled. She hated her name and always made sure people called her by her nickname.

Bob nodded. "Fine. Edi. Isn't there anyone you can take with you? A single beautiful woman in South America is going to be a target."

"I'll be fine, dad," she said, brushing off his concern. "I'm sure there'll be security at the facility."

"But they won't be watching you individually," Bob said. "What about when you leave the facility property?"

"Then I'll take my pepper spray."

"I'd feel better if—"

"Dad. Please." Edi stopped moving and looked her father in the eye. "I'll be fine. You worry about getting re-elected and I'll take care of myself."

Her dad sighed. "No way I can change your mind?"

"Not a chance," Edi said firmly.

"THANKS FOR MEETING with me on such short notice," Mr. Ross said as he held out his hand to Harlan Lockwood. "I realize this was very last minute, but Quentin Gruffman said you'd be able to help me."

Harlan shook the man's hand and nodded toward a chair. "We're happy to work with you Mr. Ross. Please have a seat and you can tell us what's going on."

Archer watched the man unbutton his suit coat before sitting down. Their new client was as polished as they came and that always made Archer slightly nervous, but it wasn't his job to judge a person, simply protect them.

As an employee of Lockwood Industries, Archer played the role of protector often. Not too many years ago, he'd been part of the military, but when his good friend and comrade, Harlan Lockwood had been captured by enemy forces, then eventually released from both prison and the military, Archer had waited out his contract, then left to join his military brother in show of support for all that Harlan had gone through.

And Archer hadn't been the only one. Harlan's two brothers, Sawyer and Ridge, who together with Harlan made up the Lockwood triplets, had also left their career path, along with Valentina Lopez and Roman Lanley. The familial connection they'd formed during their time together in the service had carried them beyond their contracts and into real life.

A few months after they had all left the armed forces and joined Harlan, Lockwood Industries had been born. It had been the perfect project. Allowing each of them the opportunity to use the skills they'd developed during their years of service, while helping Harlan get back on his feet mentally.

Archer didn't know the full story of Harlan's time as a prisoner, but he knew it had changed his friend. Harlan no longer smiled and the dark bags under his eyes testified to his lack of sleep as well. He seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, but Archer was at a loss as to how to help. He just kept hoping and praying that being involved in a project and being surrounded by those who cared for Harlan the most would be enough to help his friend out of his funk.

Mr. Ross sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know if you know anything about my family, Mr. Lockwood, but I've been very involved in the political arena for many years."

Harlan nodded. "I think most of us," he glanced at Archer and the other employees in the room, who all nodded, "have heard of you Mr. Ross."

Mr. Ross nodded. "Then I suppose you've also heard of my daughter Edwina?"

Archer frowned. He'd never heard of a daughter. He thought Mr. Ross had two sons.

Harlan nodded. "From your first marriage, right?"

Mr. Ross nodded. "Yes. She's in her late twenties now, and likes to spend her time on humanitarian aid missions."

Harlan nodded his understanding.

"Edwina and I..." Mr. Ross cleared his throat. "We don't always get along very well, not since the divorce. But despite what she thinks, I love her and want her to be safe." He sighed. "This time she's headed down to Argentina and I just don't trust that a single, beautiful woman like her will be safe down there."

Harlan nodded. "Understandably."

"I'd like to send one of your men," Mr. Ross glanced at Valentina, "Or women, with her. But there's a catch."

Archer narrowed his gaze, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"She can't know you're there to protect her."

Archer's eyebrows shot up high. "Why not?" he asked before he could think better of it.

Mr. Ross turned toward Archer. "Because she's stubborn enough to believe she'll be fine. She doesn't like to take anything from me, but I can't say that I blame her for that." He shook his head, looking tired. "When she was in her teens, our household fell apart and the veil was torn from her eyes." He gave a sad smile. "She's never really recovered or trusted anyone ever again. She graduated from high school and took off, refusing to ever speak of it. It doesn't help that her mother was killed in a drunk driving accident not too long after our break up. Edwina holds everyone at a distance. She doesn't trust easily."

"I still don't understand why she'd be so opposed to protection," Archer said, leaning forward. He rested his clasped hands on the table. "Doesn't she know the danger of the area she's going to?"

Mr. Ross shrugged. "Probably, but she thinks she can take a can of pepper spray and be fine." He looked back to Harlan. "Truth is, I think it had more to do with me than anything. I've changed since she left. My new wife has helped me settle down and build a real family, but Edwina has only ever known the politically driven me. She doesn't trust that my suggestions are because of love. She thinks I just want to look good to the public."

Archer held in an eye roll. *Heaven save us from stubborn women,* he thought bitterly. He had a sister who was the exact same way. She often did things just because she knew Archer wouldn't like it. It drove him crazy no matter how much he loved her.

"It sounds to me like your idea of being undercover might be the best option," Harlan stepped back into his lead roll. "If we sent a man down to the same project, he could keep an eye on her without letting her know why he was really there."

Mr. Ross nodded. "That's what I'm hoping for. She doesn't ever have to know."

Archer frowned. "I'm not sure that's the best idea. Generally these types of things have a way of coming out."

Sawyer slapped his shoulder. "I agree with Archer. If one of us shows up down there, why can't we just tell her? It will probably make the whole thing easier."

Mr. Ross shook his head. "Not this time. I know my daughter and she will not be happy." He huffed. "It wouldn't surprise me if she left in the middle of the night just to escape a situation like that."

Archer shook his head. He didn't like it, but there was little he could do. The client usually got their way unless their suggestions created a real danger to whoever was assigned the case. *Not telling her isn't dangerous, it's just dumb.*

Harlan spoked up. "I understand your concern and since you know your daughter best, we'll follow your advice." His blue eyes turned to Archer. "I think this might be an assignment best suited to you, Archer."

Archer's eyebrows shot up. "Me?" He wasn't thrilled with the idea of chasing after a ridiculous woman who refused to see reason.

"You blend in better with a crowd for one thing," Harlan said with a nod. "Sending Roman or one of us would probably tip her off immediately."

Archer scowled and folded his arms over his chest. He wasn't short by any means, coming in at six-foot-one, but other than Valentina, that made him the smallest of the men. Not to mention he was more lean muscle, than bulk like the triplets and Roman. The others were built like linebackers, where Archer was more like a wide receiver..

Ridge coughed to cover his snicker and Archer shot him a look.

Harlan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "That wasn't an insult, Arch. But between your size and your marksmanship, you're probably best

qualified anyway." He sighed. "Down in a place like Argentina, you're going to want to carry a concealed weapon at all times."

Archer relaxed his stiff back. He knew Harlan was right, but that didn't mean he had to like it. He nodded. "Whatever you say, boss."

Harlan nodded his thanks and turned back to Mr. Ross. "I have a few more questions for you and then we'll get Archer off as quickly as possible."

Mr. Ross gave a curt nod. "I appreciate it. Thank you."

Archer settled into his seat, mentally going over the things he would need to pack while Harlan asked questions. As Harlan excused the other men who weren't going to be involved, Ridge slipped up and whispered in Archer's ear.

"Better watch it," Ridge teased. "This sounds like the perfect recipe for loooove."

Archer swatted at him, sending Ridge out the door chuckling. *Just because everyone else is falling for their assignments doesn't mean I will,* Archer lamented. *Having a woman would be fine, but I've never been one to go after the stubborn ones*.

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