

CHAPTER FOUR

Bliss woke, aware someone was standing over her in the dark room. She wished she'd tucked one of Jake's knives under her pillow. He had a rack of them on the wall by the door—but she'd made the mistake of believing she was safe in Saint Security's command center. Though, after an insane midnight ride from the Oaxaca de Juárez airport, maybe she shouldn't have been.

The SUV sped away from the city lights, the roads thinning as they climbed through the moonlit countryside and up the mountainside past the occasional silhouette of a shack jutting from the scrub brush. A turn here and there, and they were soon bouncing over dirt roads. Security firms didn't require such remoteness.

But Saint Security was secretive and she'd been preoccupied with trying to keep her stomach out of her throat. Even buckled up, her insides slammed against her ribcage as they climbed the twisting road lit only by the SUV's *parking lights*. It had her questioning if there was even a shoulder to the road or just a sheer drop off...or if these guys doing the whole maneuvering-to-lose-any-tail was some charade for her sake.

Finally, their lights sliced across a walled compound, a massive iron-enforced wood door sliding open to receive them. If that mad ride hadn't been enough of a warning to Bliss, the armed guards greeting them should have been. But she'd been exhausted and beyond caring about anything, except finding her brother.

Now, with some unknown man standing over her, she realized the mistake she'd made.

Pretending to roll over in her sleep, she simultaneously grabbed her pillow and walloped the shadowed form as she leapt out of bed. The man howled. Her feet tangled in the bedding and she landed belly-down on the floor with a yelp.

Instantly, one of Jake's team filled the doorway, flicking on the light switch. "Everything okay in here, Boss?"

"Yeah," Jake snapped, his tone more than his answer likely sending the man out of the sparse space Jake had referred to as his room when he'd deposited her there last night...or rather in the wee hours of the morning.

From her current perspective on the floor, the scent of coffee filled her nostrils and a tin cup tottered in a pool of dark liquid next to a pair of naked feet—very masculine naked feet. She peered up past the manly toes to find Jake holding the front of his tee and crotch of his fatigues away from his body.

"Why the hell did you hit me?" he demanded.

She rolled onto her backside and sat up. "Because you snuck up on me and, for all I knew, you were some creep come to attack me."

"I was bringing you coffee and a breakfast burrito. Excuse me for trying to be a good host."

Ah, yes, now she recognized the scent of peppers and spotted the salsa and egg fragments clinging to his shirt. She grimaced. "Sorry, all I saw in the dark was a shadow standing over me and I reacted."

He rolled his soiled t-shirt off over his head, revealing a six-pack and sculpted pecs worthy of her fictional Nick Savage. She couldn't count how many times she'd described Savage in this exact stage of undress...and more. Or less. A sigh escaped her.

He tossed the shirt onto the puddle of coffee. His idea of mopping up the mess?

But a humorous snort had Bliss blinking at her hunky hero. A hint of a smile lifted the corners of his mouth, that near smile softening his angular features and making him appear almost approachable.

"You find my reaction funny?" she said.

"I find it a good reaction."

"Of course it was good. I was defending myself."

"That's what I mean," he said, sobering. "You've got better instincts than I expected. Just, next time make sure your feet are clear of tangling sheets before you run."

He offered her a hand up and jerked her to her feet. She slammed into his bare chest and the breath went out of her. It reminded her of how he'd trapped her against her apartment door when she'd insisted on coming along with him and he'd argued against it. He'd been so commanding, so take charge...so close that if he'd lowered his face but two inches and she'd raised hers an equal distance, their lips would have touched.

She began to tilt her face toward his when he said, "You have green eyes. Your brother has blue."

She stumbled back from him, brushing the feel of him from the tee she'd slept in. "He takes after the Burns side of the family. I take after the O'Haras."

Jake nodded, making no move to replace his soiled tee. Just stood there studying her through unreadable eyes, eyes that took her in from her bare toes to the crown of her head.

Oh God, what had her nap—er, night's sleep done to her hair?

She ran her fingers through her hair, hopefully taming her long, thick locks; and thankful she'd been too tired last night to strip off anything more than her boots before crawling into bed.

"What time is it?" she asked, if for no other reason than to make him stop staring at her.

"Daybreak," he said, nodding toward the room's single shuttered window before turning to the footlocker at the end of the bed.

She swung her suitcase onto the mattress and flipped open its lid. "What kind of clothes do I need?"

"Whatever makes you comfortable," he said.

"Comfortable?" she asked, digging around inside her suitcase. "Isn't it more important I blend in, or at least dress for where we're going and what we'll be doing?"

"I agreed to let you come this far, Miss O'Hara. But you *are not* going into the field with us."

She turned to him. "I need to go out and look for my brother."

The footlocker lid shut with a resounding thud and he faced her, a fresh pair of camo fatigues and black tee in his fist. "It's not safe where we're going."

She swallowed hard. "Does that mean you're not going to look for Robbie, or that where you think Robbie is isn't a good place?"

"I'm heading into the city to check out his digs. They aren't in the nicest of neighborhoods."

She suppressed the shiver gathering at the base of her spine. "You cut your vacation short to help *me* find *my* brother. I should be involved."

"You coming with isn't going to help."

She sucked a bolstering breath. "He's my brother, my responsibility."

"You might even be a hindrance to our efforts."

He likely saw her as some histrionic woman and *that* pressed another one of her hot buttons. "I've never been a *hindrance* to anyone," she said, glowering at him. "And I didn't travel all this way to sit in a bunker of a command center in a foreign country wringing my hands. I'm going out there and looking for my brother with or without you."

"Be prepared for a long walk. We're a good fifteen miles from the city."

She lifted her hiking boots off the floor by way of an answer.

His fist tightened around the clothing he held. "You're stubborn enough to follow us on foot, aren't you?"

"Not stubborn. Desperate."

A contemplative crease deepened above the bridge of his nose and she held her breath, knowing she was better off with him and his men than she was alone.

"Fine," he finally said. "Just don't go all hysterical on me when you see his place."

"I won't," she said, dropping the boots, so grateful he'd agreed to let her come with him she'd barely turned her back to him before peeling off her tee. "Just give me enough time to change into a fresh shirt and brush my teeth."

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Surprised she'd taken off her shirt in front of him, Jake stared at her bare back. Correction, he stared at the slim strap stretched across her back. Red and lacy with even thinner straps riding over her shoulders. A red bra was the last thing he'd expected this woman to be wearing under her t-shirt.

"It's not polite to stare, St. John," she said, her tone no nonsense with a hint of teasing.

His gaze snapped up to find Bliss O'Hara still facing away from him as she threaded a dark tee over her head.

"You got eyes in the back of your head, O'Hara?"

"Motherly instinct," she retorted, smoothing the tee down her anything-but-motherly torso.

"But you're not a—"

She gave him an over-the-shoulder *have you forgotten I raised my brother the better part of his life* look.

Maternal, stubborn, decisive, instinctual, and sexy. Damn, but this woman had more layers than an onion. And she'd caught him in an unguarded moment. But a red lace bra. Who'd have seen that coming?

Duh. Romance writer. How could he have forgotten that fact?

He scowled and turned his back to her. Which did nothing to erase the memory of that red bra, and had him wondering what color the panties under her jeans were.

A long unused member of his body twitched.

This was not happening. Not with this woman. Not even for a one-night stand. She was Middle-America through and through. A nice normal girl, except that she wrote romance novels and wore a red lacy bra.

But then, didn't most women think in romantic terms? Weren't most women searching for a hero to marry and build a family with them?

He was *not* romance hero material. Hell, he wasn't even husband material.

His coffee-drenched pants had turned clammy against his groin, further cooling his hormones. He stripped off his fatigues and underwear. A squeal sounded behind him. He spun towards Bliss O'Hara to find her facing him, the hiking boots clutched to her chest and her eyes...

Noting their downward angle lined up with the region just below his waist, he couldn't help but mock her with her own words. "It's not polite to stare, Miss O'Hara."

She dropped her boots, snatched a make-up bag from her suitcase, and headed for the bathroom. "I'll be brushing my teeth."

He watched her stalk off, trying to fit the girl scandalized by seeing his privates with the woman who had written one helluva steamy love scene in the Cooper book. He hadn't thought much about that scene when he'd read it. But now that he'd met the woman who'd created it...

Who was Bliss O'Hara? Protective sister? Seductress? Or something else altogether? Bottom line, the more he learned about this woman, the less he seemed to know her.